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Prologue

Life, mused Harry Potter, was Hell. He had been back at the Dursleys' for only three days, and in that stretch of time, one bit of bad news had come after another. It started in the car, with Uncle Vernon grumbling under his breath about "freaks" having no right to tell him how to live his life and raise his family. Upon arrival at his bedroom, a somber-looking Fawkes greeted Harry with a letter from Dumbledore. The letter, written in the Headmasters typical stoic-yet-cheerful style, had informed Harry that for security reasons, he could not send or receive any mail except that which had been screened by the Headmaster and sent with Fawkes.

Bitterly suspecting that this meant another summer cut off from the Wizarding World, Harry crumpled the parchment and was on the point of throwing it at Fawkes, but the phoenix had already Apparated away, or however it was that phoenixes traveled. Peeved at the lack of suitable outlets for his anger, Harry stormed down the stairs intent on baiting Dudley. When he reached the landing and turned to face the living room, however, he saw not an overweight youth pigging out in front of the TV, but rather a grapefruit-sized and hairy-knuckled fist hurtling at frightening velocity toward his face.

CRACK!

The fist drove directly into Harry's jaw, and caught unawares, Harry was knocked flat onto the floor, stunned. This hadn't happened in quite a long time. The fist, which turned out to belong to Uncle Vernon, retracted as its owner began yelling ferociously, punctuating an important point every so often with a swift kick to the ribs. As it was, Harry caught very little of what the man said, processing only small snatches between blows.

"...LIAR..."

"...BESMIRCHING MY GOOD NAME..."

"...WILL NOT TOLERATE..."

"...BUNCH OF WORTHLESS FREAKS!"

The last word was emphasized with a direct hit on Harry's face, and then his Uncle stalked away, still a violent shade of purple.

Later in the evening, at dinner, Harry noticed that he was back on the stale bread and moldy cheese diet, while the Dursleys ate a full lobster each. It was at the conclusion of this meal that the Dursleys notified him that he was to be confined to the house for the remainder of his stay.

That night, Harry's dreams were filled with horrors from the Department of Mysteries. This had been rather standard while at Hogwarts, but now, they were worse. Now, Ron was eaten by the brain. Now, Neville was tortured into insanity by Lestrage as she cackled, "Like father, like son!" Now, Fawkes didn't show up to save Dumbledore from Voldemort's Avada Kedavra. Now, Hermione was cleaved in half by Dolohov's spell. Harry woke up with a scream, and it took several minutes for him to calm down and drift back to sleep.

When Harry rose the next morning, he saw that his window had been refitted with bars. The door was locked. And a cold tin of soup was sitting just in front of his cat flap.

Brilliant, Harry thought. So glad I'm 'protected' here.

Just as Harry had that thought, the sound of turning locks met his ears, and his Uncle entered the room, carrying a cricket bat. Without any preamble, he whacked Harry across the forehead with it,

screamed something about lying freaks that didn't eat the food they were given, and stomped out.

And so, a routine was established. Three times a day, cold soup was pushed through the flap. Three times a day, Vernon would follow it through the door, carrying some fresh blunt object. Three times a day, Harry would be knocked unconscious. Three times a day, the hate in him would grow just a little bit stronger.

Yes, thought Harry, life has indeed been Hell. His gaze fell upon his wand, lying innocently on top of a T-Shirt on his trunk. Would it be worth it? It would be considered self-defense, right? You couldn't get expelled for self-defense. He couldn't get expelled for self-defense. He was protected by Dumbledore. He was Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. The public would understand. The Wizengamot would understand, and that's all that really mattered.

And so Harry sat, for what felt like hours, staring at the wand, trying to work up the nerve to do it. With one word, he could delay the pain. With another, he could return all that Uncle Vernon had inflicted upon him, and then some. With two, he could be free of this nightmare forever.

Forever. The word called to him like a long-lost lover, like a tray of Heaven's manna to a starving Ethiopian. He would do it.

Harry did not flinch when his uncle burst through the door, and had Vernon been a smarter man, he would have taken this as his cue to leave. Instead, he raised the 9-iron he was carrying and sneered at his nephew.

"Very funny, Potter. You can't scare me with that stick. You're not allowed to do magic in the summer."

Harry's eyes were curiously blank as he raised his wand, his voice oddly devoid of the emotions he normally wore on his sleeve.

"I don't care, Uncle," he stated flatly, and Vernon's eyes widened in shock as a tiny pinprick of green light glowed on the tip of Harry's wand.

"Goodbye, Vernon," said Harry, and then he ended with a whisper.

"Avada Kedavra!"

AN: Hey, so here it is, my first chapter. Please review!

Chapter One: Lord Black-Potter Goes to Court

Vernon Dursley lay still on the ground, eyes frozen open, mouth wide in a silent scream.

Harry Potter stood over him, wand drawn but lowered, head swirling with a frothing potpourri of warring emotions. Shock that he had actually done it. Revulsion in the thought that he was now a killer. Relief that his nightmare imprisonment was over. Euphoria that came with the use of any Dark Magic, especially the Unforgiveables. But the emotion that came to the forefront of Harry's consciousness was an overwhelming sensation that he contained immense power. Ultimate power, he thought, remembering Grand Moff Tarkin's remarks on the potential of the Death Star.

The power seduced him.

How could it not? Harry had been bereft of it his whole life. Throughout his entire existence others had controlled him: Be it Dumbledore, the Dursleys, Voldemort, his friends, his teachers, his parents, or that bitch called Fate.

But now he had the power. He could make that most basic of choices – to live or to die - for whomever he pleased, and with just two words. Slowly, a smile grew on Harry's face.

Harry felt his eyes close of their own volition, and the world went dark. Then, he was rushing through a great field of gray, with flashing blue-white lights zipping by every so often. After 30 seconds of this travel, the lights slowed down and he peered down and saw a giant sphere of light just out of his reach. On closer inspection, the sphere was composed of thousands of smaller lights, each identical to ones that had whizzed past not a minute hence. The sphere was perfect but for a single hump on the side of the sphere farthest from Harry. A thin thread of lights trailed out from the vertex of this hump and

extended off into the indeterminate distance. Harry reached out to touch this strand; for some reason, it seemed to call for him to do so.

His fingers were on the verge of making contact when a sharp tapping noise brought him back to consciousness. Momentarily confused, Harry recovered himself and searched for the source of the disturbance. A medium sized brown owl was hovering outside Harry's window, tied to its claws was a letter with an official-looking seal. Forgetting himself, Harry Vanished the bars and magically unlocked and opened the window, granting the bird access. It swooped in, dropped its load on the teen's shoulder, and flew merrily back out of the window, casting Harry a smug glance over its shoulder and earning a stern hoot of annoyance from Hedwig.

Harry picked up the envelope and turned it over. A Ministry seal, Harry noted, and now foreboding was his overwhelming sense. He slit the envelope open with a finger, unfolded the note within, and read the now familiar hand of Mafalda Hopkirk.

Dear Mr. Potter,

We have received intelligence that you performed the Killing Curse in the presence of a Muggle at six minutes past six this evening.

The severity of the breach of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery, as well as the Unforgiveable Curses Declaration of 1755 has resulted in your expulsion from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and the release of a warrant for your arrest. A team of Aurors will be calling at your place of residence shortly to take you into custody.

Hoping you are well,

Yours sincerely,

Mafalda Hopkirk

Improper Use of Magic Office Ministry of Magic

Harry checked the digital alarm clock next to his bed. It read 6:08. How on earth did they get an owl here that fast, Harry wondered. Then he realized the severity of his situation. If the Ministry could get an owl to his room all the way from London in just two minutes, it wouldn't take much longer than that to send a team of Aurors over. That meant he needed to pack.

Hurriedly, Harry grabbed up his essential items - his father's invisibility cloak, the Marauder's Map, and the scrapbook Hagrid gave to him – shrunk them, and placed them securely in his right pocket. Then, he sat down on the bed, set his wand down beside him, and waited.

Sure enough, no more than three minutes later, he heard a slightly muffled roar of "Reducto!" His door exploded, and three Aurors burst through the frame, wands at the ready, looking wildly around the room with their teeth clenched, apparently itching for any excuse to curse anything into oblivion.

The intensity of the men amused Harry. "A little excessive, don't you think?" he asked dryly, indicating the fragments of door now scattered about the floor and his own, non-threatening, posture.

One of the men had the grace to look a touch abashed and slightly lowered his wand, but the other two maintained their steely composure. The largest Auror jabbed his wand threateningly at Harry and growled with malicious delight, "Harry James Potter, you are under arrest for violation of the International Confederation of Wizards' Statute of Secrecy, violation of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery, and," here the beefy man spied the dead Uncle Vernon lying not two feet in front of him, "first-degree murder of a Muggle by means of the Killing Curse. You

will now be taken into custody to await trial before the High Court of the Wizengamot."

Harry did not move. "Aurors," he said in a reasonable tone, "I did what I did in self-defense, you see the golf club in the man's hands. Couldn't you just give me Veritaserum, verify my story, and call it a day?"

The large Auror was not amused. "Come with us now, Mr. Potter, or we will force you."

Harry grudgingly stood, and the three Aurors escorted him out. A Portkey was roughly shoved into his hands, and after that horrible navel jerk and spinning sensation, Harry found himself in a dark, 8' by 8' cell, bare except for a cot with a razor-thin mattress, pillow, and a toilet in the corner furthest from the door.

And so, for three days, Harry sat. He slept very little: the imprisonment was so similar to his time at Privet Drive that he would have nightmares of a raging Vernon bursting in with all kinds of pain-inflicting tools and wake up screaming. It was better, Harry supposed, than having Vernon actually charge into the room, and better than watching Voldemort rape, pillage, torture, and kill all night. But, it was no great honor, either. I know I'm the Chosen One, Harry recalled Tevye's line bitterly, thinking of the new moniker the press had given him of late, but couldn't the Fates choose someone else every once in a while?

On the third day, the cell door was roughly thrown open and the light streaming in from the hallway blinded Harry momentarily.

"Time for your trial, sweetheart," the guard standing at the door sneered mockingly. Harry did not dignify the remark with a response, but rather merely passed the guard and continued down the hallway to the lifts.

A squat, dangerous-looking goblin in an official-looking uniform stood in the center of the lift, hands clasped behind his back. As he saw Harry and the Auror approach, the goblin easily raised his right hand and snapped his fingers once. The Auror went slightly cross-eyed for a second, shook his head, and walked away in the direction from which he had come. The goblin beckoned Harry with one finger, and confused, Harry obeyed.

The lift door closed, and Harry quirked an eyebrow at the goblin. "My name is Grabtooth." The goblin stated his name as though it explained everything. When it became obvious that the name did not explain everything, the goblin went on.

"I am the head of the Inheritance and Succession Department at Gringotts." Here the goblin paused again, waiting for some sign of recognition.

When none came, the goblin sighed and continued. "Mr. Potter, whether or not you are aware of it, you are heir to two very large fortunes, those of the Blacks and the Potters. We'll go over the details later, but very soon you will be a very, very rich man."

"Won't matter too much if I'm in jail, will it?" Harry had been thinking during his three-day imprisonment and was now much less optimistic about his chances of acquittal.

Grabtooth gave a small chuckle. "That is why I am here, Mr. Potter, to tell you that all is taken care of. Gringotts will not allow one of our largest and most recognizable clients go to jail. Merely stay calm in that courtroom, speak of only the facts, and you will walk away without even a fine."

The lift clattered to a halt as the goblin completed its pronouncement and the iron gates creaked open. They were now in a corridor that Harry vaguely recognized as the one leading to the courtroom where he was tried the previous summer. As Harry stepped out of the lift,

Grabtooth whispered to him, "Remember, stay calm."

Harry nodded, exited the lift, and strode toward a grim-faced Auror who was evidently waiting for him. The Auror gave Harry a curt nod and led him into the courtroom.

Courtroom Ten was exactly the same as the last time Harry had set foot in it. Dark stone walls, dimly lit by torches, surrounded him. Ahead of him sat the Wizengamot, 50 of the most powerful men in Wizarding Britain. In the center sat Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic, who wore an extremely smug look on his bloated face. So far, the only difference Harry could detect was a large crowd filled the benches that had been empty.

As he walked to the chained chair in the center, Harry scanned the crowd for familiar faces, and he found them. To his right, Hermione was sitting with Neville, Dean, and Seamus, each of whom wore looks that were a mixture of worry and outright sadness. Curiously, the Weasleys were not sitting with this group, but rather were a few rows back on Harry's left. Mrs. Weasley was crying and being comforted by her husband. Fred and George were looking on with apprehensive interest. Bill had a pensive look on his face, and Ginny was gazing down on Harry with eyes full of unshed tears. The most interesting Weasley, however, was Ron. He was sitting on the outside of his family, arms crossed, and wearing a facial expression not uncommon to that of a person experiencing an old outhouse for the first time.

Above the Weasleys sat Draco Malfoy, who looked as giddy as anyone who's father had just been arrested could. A few seats over sat Blaise Zabini, a pretty Slytherin girl in Harry's year. Her face was unreadable, but Harry detected the slightest hint of...was it approval? Harry had never exchanged more than a few sentences with Blaise; she seemed to be a true Slytherin that worked behind the scenes to achieve her ends. Harry filed her posture away for later analysis and continued to walk.

Finally, he reached the manacled chair and sat. Instantly, the chains sprang to life and fastened him tightly to the seat. Make that two differences, Harry thought.

Cornelius Fudge cleared his throat imperiously. "Order, order," he called, banging a gavel to quiet the audience. Behind him, a few members of the Wizengamot corrected their posture.

"We are here today," Fudge began, "to hear the case of Mr. Harry James Potter of Number 4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey, who stands accused of first-degree murder of a Muggle and use of an Unforgiveable Curse against a fellow human being." Fudge paused for effect, then stared down at Harry. "Are you Mr. Harry James Potter of Number 4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey?"

"Yes," Harry declared, and Percy Weasley, sitting on the Minister's left, began scribbling furiously.

"And how do you plead to these charges?" Fudge asked.

"Not guilty by reason of self-defense," Harry said with a clear voice, just as he'd practiced. He heard a number of cameras snapping pictures.

Thus, the trial began. Looking back, Harry felt that the goblins may have wasted whatever resources they used to ensure his acquittal; since this trial was being held very publicly, Fudge could not use the same bully tactics he had at the previous year's hearing and as such, Harry was afforded plenty of time to tell his side of the story. The peanut gallery did its job beautifully, gasping when Harry described the treatment he had been subjected to for those three hellish days at Privet Drive and nodding its collective head when Harry explained why he felt he had to take Vernon's life. Fudge's case was sunk when, after Harry recalled the first time Vernon smashed him in the head with a wrench, Percy looked up from his writing, snorted, and asked

why Vernon would suddenly start beating Harry after nearly 15 years of peaceful existence. Harry then treated Percy to a long history lecture on the various physical and emotional abuses committed against him by the Dursleys. At the end of his tale, the crowd appeared ready to take up pitchforks and torches against the family; no one, especially not a group of lowly Muggles, should be allowed to harm the Boy-Who-Lived like that.

In the end, the vote was 49 for acquittal, and only Cornelius Fudge for conviction. After the trial, Hermione and Blaise showed signs of wanting to talk to him, but a pair of goblins whisked Harry away before either could reach him. Before he knew it, Harry was sitting at the head of a long mahogany conference table, surrounded by goblins.

Before him were but two sheets of paper, although the goblins held many more in their arms. Harry read the one on the left first, which said,

I, Sirius Black, being of sound body and mind, do hereby adopt Harry James Potter into my care as Magical Guardian. In front of these witnesses I do swear to provide for, care for, nurture, and protect Harry James Potter to the best of my ability, until such time as Harry James Potter reaches the age of majority. Henceforth, Harry James Potter shall be known as Harry James Black-Potter, and shall be considered a full member of both House Black and House Potter.

Signed,

Sirius Black

Harry sat riveted to his chair, eyes watering and fixated on the document in front of him. I could have lived with Sirius this summer.

Eventually, Harry moved on to the next document, which bore the legend "The Last Will and Testament of Lord Sirius Black." Harry

glanced mournfully up at the goblins, one of whom looked back with...was it empathy? Harry decided that the rare skill of displaying an emotion other than surliness or greed was what had landed the goblin in this room. Banishing an amusing mental image of a cavern full of goblins practicing "I'm sorry" faces to audition for the job, Harry returned, slightly more cheerful, to the task at hand.

The Last Will and Testament of Lord Sirius Black

I, Lord Sirius Black, being of sound body and mind, do hereby make my last Will and Testament.

First, to Mr. Remus J. Lupin, I leave a stipend of ten million Galleons per year and the Black Family Chateaux in Marseilles, with the condition that Mr. Lupin spend no less than one thousand Galleons per month on personal effects. It's not charity, Moony, it's the least I can thank you for your years of friendship. Now go and have fun.

Second, to Auror Nymphadora Tonks, I leave a stipend of two million Galleons per year, and the Black Penthouse in London. I know entry-level Auror salary isn't too great, so I hope this helps. Please be there for Harry when the time comes, he will need you.

Third, to Mr. Arthur Weasley, I leave five million Galleons. Despite the disagreements I had with your wife, you and your family have always acted as the family Harry never had, and for that I am profoundly grateful. Please accept this as a token of that gratitude.

Fourth, to Miss Hermione Granger, I leave one million, five hundred thousand Galleons. I cannot thank you enough for helping me to escape in your third year. Thank you also for being Harry's most loyal friend, and I ask that you remain so no matter what happens.

Fifth, to Mr. Ronald Weasley, I leave one million Galleons. You, too, have been a great and loyal friend to Harry. I know your sensitivity in matters regarding money, but please take this in the spirit that it is

offered, the spirit of gratitude, not condescension.

Finally, all Black family assets, holdings, properties, titles, and lands, as well as all of my personal belongings not delegated above are left to Harry James Black-Potter. Harry, I'm sorry I didn't get to stay with you longer. Please, for my sake, don't dwell on my death. Live each day like it's your last; chase girls, play Quidditch, stay true to your friends. You will likely discover something about yourself sometime soon, it's not my place to say what, and when you do, please remember that even the best prophecies are self-fulfilling.

Here ends the Last Will and Testament of Lord Sirius Black.

Witnesses: Kingsley Shacklebolt and Alastor Moody.

Upon seeing that Harry had finished reading the documents before him, Grabtooth stepped forward. "Lord Black-Potter," he began smoothly, "as you have no doubt gathered from the size of the apportionments in your step-father's Will, the Black Estate is a very large one, indeed the Blacks have always held one of the largest accounts in our bank." He extended a claw-like hand filled with several of the documents. "Here is a complete summary and description of the Black assets."

Harry accepted the documents and began to read. As he went over the rather expansive list, he skimmed over most parts, but a few key components did catch his eye:

Liquid Assets...3,770,309,000 Galleons

Black Castle. 90,000 ft², 100 rooms, located on 6,000 acres outside Portsmouth. Served as the Black Ancestral Home for nearly 1200 years prior to purchase of the London Estate. Magical defenses: Unplottable, Proximity ward, last updated in 1852.

Alphard's Atoll. Small chain of islands off the coast of Tunisia. Was

purchased in 1893 by Alphard Black. Main island (12 sq. miles) contains 30,000 ft² villa, with 25 rooms. Adjacent islands were renovated in 1980 by Lord Sirius Black, contain amenities such as full-size Quidditch pitch, guest huts (2,000 ft² each) for up to 200 guests, Combat Simulator. Much of all the islands is covered with jungle. Magical defenses: Unplottable, Anti-Portkey ward, Anti-Apparition ward, last updated in 1980. Water directly around the islands contains 3 Sea Serpents.

Black Penthouses. Located in most major port cities around the world, the Penthouses were purchased in 1975 by Regulus Black. Each is at least 10,000 ft² and house elves update the furnishings every five years. Magical defenses: Proximity ward, Anti-Portkey ward, Anti-Apparition ward, last updated in 1978. Accessible only by Floo from the Black Castle, the London Estate, or the main house on Alphard's Atoll.

Black Shipping. The world's oldest shipping firm. Does business in both the Magical and Muggle worlds. Yearly profits exceed one billion Galleons. Ownership stake: 100

Black Magical Zoo. The world's largest collection of magical creatures. Is the Wizarding World's third most popular tourist destination, behind the Quidditch World Cup and Diagon Alley. Yearly profits exceed five million Galleons. Ownership stake: 100

ExxonMobil. Initial startup money was given to John D. Rockefeller by Alphard Black in the mid-1800s. Yearly profits in excess of six billion Galleons. Ownership stake: 40

The Daily Prophet. Founded in conjunction with the Potter Family in 1732. Yearly profits hover around two million Galleons. Ownership stake: 33

Count of Hampshire. Traditional Title of the Head of the Black Family. Gives the Head a seat in the Upper House of the Wizengamot.

Harry sat back and let out a slow breath. This was a lot to comprehend. The goblins had no intentions of allowing him to catch his breath, however, as a goblin dressed in fine silk robes lined with some sort of silvery fur stepped forward and addressed him.

"Lord Black-Potter, please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Beastslayer. A long time ago, I served as your parents' financial advisor, and I have overseen the Potter Estate since their death. Since you have accepted your inheritance from the late Lord Black, you are now subject to an old law regarding Pureblood families and their heirs.

"Now, don't give me that look, please milord," added Beastslayer, noticing the expression of fright and anger that had appeared on Harry's face. "The law is nothing bad, it merely states that Lords and scions of the Noble Families come of age at 16, not the usual 17. This means, milord, that you will come into your Potter inheritance a full year earlier than you expected."

I thought I already had come into my Potter inheritance, thought Harry, but instead he asked, "Shouldn't this have already been the expectation? I've always been the Potter heir."

"True, milord," said Beastslayer, stroking his chin knowingly. "However, since your mother's line is all Muggle as far back as genealogical charts go, you are not a pureblood, and thus, not considered a 'scion,' despite the Potter line being among the oldest still in existence."

Harry nodded, and then massaged his temples in a futile attempt to clear his muddled thoughts. Seeing that the young Earl was thoroughly overwhelmed, Grabtooth said, "That's all the business for today. Lord Black-Potter, there will be a public reading of the late Lord Black's will in three days' time. Your attendance is not necessary, although it might be beneficial to you to come. The way people

behave at will readings is often the best judge of their character."

With that, the goblins exited the room, with Harry following. A young-looking goblin in a rather plain suit escorted Harry back to the lobby.

Once he was alone, Harry went to thinking about where he was to stay. I'll just rent a room at the Leaky Cauldron, decided Harry. He exited Gringotts and walked, head down, towards the inn. He had not made it more than a block from the marble entranceway when he crashed headlong into a rather squishy something and fell. Harry picked himself up, looked around to see what he had hit, and was greeted with something he had never seen before.

Albus Dumbledore was glaring down at him with a look of utmost fury on his face.

A/N: Yes, yes, I know, not very much action in this chapter, more than a couple cliches, but I promise that everything you see here)and perhaps some stuff you didn't!) will become important later on. To all those who may be confused by the shift in Harry's mindset from seduced-by-the-dark person back to a more canon-like bitchiness from the beginning to the end of this chapter, that has to do with the three-day imprisonment and the reminder of Sirius' death that is his will. Both of these triggered a relapse that will last for just a touch longer (I swear, just a touch!). So, to some review responses!

First, to Jiyu Hatell Kodai, and the rest of you who commented on the prologue's ending, I will try to end every chapter with some sort of cliffie. If that bothers anyone, go read something else.

To sambee, yes there will be plenty of "chaos, evil, and suffering," as you so aptly put it, but not for a while. I don't believe that Harry could transform from a docile, dark-magic hater into the modern-day equivalent of a Viking Berserker so quickly(look for him to fit that mold later, though).

To Parselmaster, I got that complaint on the forum at too, so I'll copy-paste the response I posted there. I can see why Vernon's abuse of Harry might seem sudden, but think about it this way: Prior to receiving his Hogwarts letter, for the entirety Harry's life at Privet Drive he was beaten, starved, and neglected by the Dursleys. Then, when he came back after his first year, they didn't beat him anymore, but Petunia swung a frying pan at his head, and Vernon threatens to beat him. After the Aunt Marge incident, however, the Dursleys realized that they couldn't get away with pissing Harry off anymore, so they left him alone. But in the summer before 5th year, Vernon showed that certain stimuli (Mundungus' Apparition, the Dementor attack) could lead him to hurt Harry again (Harry was strangled twice the day of the attack). I think that the public humiliation brought upon Vernon by the Order qualifies as a stimulus to restart the major abuse.

To Japanese-Jew, true, but Harry's plan really wasn't much of one. In true Gryffindor fashion, there was very little thought about the aftermath of Vernon's killing, unless you count the "Dumbledore will protect me" bit, which, as you saw a little of and will see more later, didn't pan out.

To tessa3, you will get your wish. Harry will have much more important things to worry about for the next few chapters than getting laid.

And finally, to Lady Erinyes, I think that Harry's line of thinking there was rational, considering his previous experience. He won't be relying on Dumbledore's protection for long, though, as the end of this chapter may have hinted.

Thanks again to everyone who read/reviewed!

Chapter Two: Confrontation and Confliction

In his lifetime, Albus Dumbledore had seen, for want of a better phrase, a lot of shit. During the war against Grindelwald, he saw his wife and two of his brothers brutally murdered by a pack of Toetessern, as the forces of the dark were then named. His lone surviving family member, Aberforth, was tortured to near-insanity by Bellatrix Lestrage's great-uncle, Rudolph Krieger. Following his astonishing defeat of Grindelwald, public clamor forced Dumbledore to preside over the administration of the Dementor's Kiss to 74 alleged Toetessern, earning a host of enemies, a deep-seated hatred of Dementors, and a lifetime of nightmares in the process.

It was at this time that Dumbledore began studying in earnest. Already a very powerful wizard, Dumbledore now strove to be the best. 'I need to protect myself,' was his mantra as he spent nearly two decades poring over the entire Hogwarts library.

Unsatisfied with his progress, Dumbledore took a five-year sabbatical from his position as Headmaster, seeking out old comrades-in-arms from the war. Dumbledore was desperate for any scrap of knowledge that would keep him ahead of any up-and-coming Dark Lord, any whisper of a spell that could defeat the evildoer before he gained any followers. Followers that would have to be Kissed when the war was over. Dumbledore didn't think he could bear it.

It was during this sabbatical that Dumbledore saw for the first time, a victim of the Killing Curse. Contrary to the stereotype of the ruthlessly efficient German, the Toetessern scorned the quick Avada Kedavra in favor of curses that killed their victims slowly or messily. Gore was something Albus had taught himself to handle. But to watch the life wiped from a person's body instantly, effortlessly, and without the remotest hope of survival triggered something deep within Dumbledore's psyche; a primal fear that no matter how hard he worked, no matter what he studied, no matter whom he contacted, he

was completely and utterly helpless against this curse.

So when Albus Dumbledore heard that his prize project, Harry Potter, had used the worst of the Unforgivables against his own uncle, he was shocked and more than a little angry. Normally a man who stayed calm through the most trying of situations, Dumbledore had spent three days storming around his newly reinstated office at Hogwarts, causing much gossip among the paintings. He recused himself from the trial, citing an emotional bias, but when Fawkes brought him word of Harry's overwhelming acquittal, Dumbledore felt compelled to go speak with the boy himself. Summoning the two Order members on duty at Grimmauld Place (he was too rushed to notice which two they were), Dumbledore made for the Leaky Cauldron, where he deduced Harry would stay. 'That's one nice thing about these teenagers,' Dumbledore thought, 'They're predictable.'

To the surprise of the aging Headmaster, however, when he asked Tom the barkeeper which room Harry was in. The toothless man replied that the Boy-Who-Lived had not yet checked in. Confused, Dumbledore left the tavern and headed up Diagon Alley, certain that Potter had not yet left the vicinity. Sure enough, not two hours later, he spotted the young savior walking out of Gringotts, walking tall but wearing a stupefied expression on his face.

Momentarily, Dumbledore was shocked. Harry's new combination of raggedy robes and an arrogant gait struck Dumbledore with a wicked case of *déjà vu*. Harry was looking and behaving exactly as a young Tom Riddle had, 50 years earlier, upon learning of the vast riches he had inherited as the last of the Slytherin line.

Ice water ran in Dumbledore's veins, and a rather unpleasant shiver worked its way up his spine. It was as though his body was trying desperately to send a message to Dumbledore's raging mind, 'Cool off, old man!'

But the effort had been in vain. All traces of twinkle gone,

Dumbledore advanced menacingly toward his student, the efforts of Tonks and Snape to keep up barely registering. Harry, who seemed lost in thought ('Just like Tom was,' thought Dumbledore grimly), did not notice his Headmaster until the two collided, sending the teen firmly to the ground. Dumbledore glared down as his pupil picked himself up and looked to see into whom he had crashed.

Harry's first reaction to seeing that the man he had run into was Albus Dumbledore was relief. The last thing the Black heir would have needed was to have inadvertently gotten into a fight with some short-tempered stranger. Harry was about to make a remark to that effect when he noticed the look of utter hatred, disgust, anger, and most shockingly, fear that his Headmaster was directing at him. The look was more intense than any Harry had seen on Dumbledore's face, and it made a breath catch in Harry's throat.

"What the Devil were you thinking, boy!" growled Dumbledore, drawing his wand and directing it at Harry's face.

Harry was now truly scared and reflexively drew his own wand. Undaunted, Dumbledore continued to quietly yell.

"An Avada Kedavra curse? A visit to Gringotts completely unscheduled and unprotected? Why are you consorting with goblins, Harry?"

Dumbledore almost made it sound like the visit to the goblins was more egregious a sin than his use of the Killing Curse, and this confused Harry so much that he could not form a response, and Dumbledore continued unheeded.

"I don't know what you were thinking," the elderly Professor raged, "There's no way you can ever go back to Privet Drive now, not now that you've gone and killed Vernon..." Here Dumbledore trailed off, turned away, and seemed momentarily lost in thought. He appeared to be muttering extremely softly to himself, but Harry thought he saw

the wizard's lips form the word "Obliviate." Suddenly, Dumbledore flew back around and was in Harry's face.

"Do you have any idea how much danger you've put yourself in?" Dumbledore's voice, while fierce as a mother bear, was now only just above a whisper.

Here, Harry got a chance to speak. "Professor Dumbledore, with all due respect, I was in a lot more danger there than I would be in a cell in Voldemort's forte-," here Harry would have begun to recant his horrifying tale to Dumbledore, but the Headmaster cut him off."

"Harry," he began, as though explaining something rather basic to someone extremely slow, "the blood wards at 4 Privet Drive prevented any attack-" but now it was Dumbledore who was cut off.

"What about attacks from within?" It was more a statement than a question. "Did you ever consider the notion that my Aunt and especially my Uncle might be angry at having to raise a magical child, and that they may have taken out that frustration on me?"

"Professor Dumbledore, if you were at the trial, you would know that I killed my uncle in self-defense, he was advancing on me with a golf club at the time and had been torturing and starving me mercilessly for the previous 3 days." Harry paused briefly to quash the memories that had sprung up, but carried on with a fiery determination, brushing aside a beetle that had landed on his arm.

"And I've been thinking, Professor, that this isn't the first time I've been abused, not by a long shot. Ever since I was old enough to do chores, the Dursleys had beaten me for not doing them well enough. I've been spanked, slapped, punched, belted, switched, caned, broken, and burned more times than I can count. And that's not to mention all the emotional damage I've suffered from not having any friends until Hogwarts, because Dudley would beat up anyone who so much as gave me a sympathetic look, or from being called

"worthless freak" in place of my actual name. Did you know that I thought "worthless freak" was my name until I was 3 and by some miracle found the blanket I was wrapped in when you left me at that hellhole? And where were you throughout all of this? Neither you nor any member of your Order ever checked on me to make sure I was all right. Not even Mrs. Figg, and she was just a block away! How could you possibly say I'm safe there?"

Harry ended his speech and stood, glowering, waiting for Dumbledore to come up with a response.

It was a long wait.

Finally, Dumbledore sighed and turned with a mournful air back to Harry. "Harry, I'm truly sorry that you were put through such an ordeal, but I must insist that you return to Privet Drive. It is the only place that is safe for you, my boy. Voldemort and his Death Eaters will not stop until he has killed you, and if he does find you that is exactly what will happen." Dumbledore paused and then continued with emphasis, "Harry, you are not ready to truly face Voldemort. If the two of you had a proper duel, you would be killed within a matter of minutes, and the entire fate of the Wizarding World would be lost."

"So your solution is to isolate me at Privet Drive? How could I possibly learn to fight him if all I can do is sit on my bed and wank off? I don't think Voldemort will be defeated by either my semen or the knowledge contained in my textbooks. Besides, the whole world knows I live at Privet Drive now, its been said three times in court! Death Eaters could camp out at the edge of the wards and kill me whenever I left the house!"

But Dumbledore wasn't listening, "Harry, if you will not quietly and respectfully return to Privet Drive, I can and will force you." At this, Tonks and Snape made themselves known. "I really hate to do this to you, Harry, but it is for your own good."

Harry's exterior assumed a combative position, wand raised, teeth clenched, eyes narrowed. Harry's interior began to panic. He really did not want to go back to Privet Drive.

Harry's eyes swept the trio in front of him, looking for any means of escape. On his left, Snape had his wand casually raised, his ever-present smirk threatening to burst into a full-on smile. His whole body seemed to be screaming "What on earth does this idiot Gryffindor think he's doing?"

In the center was Dumbledore, wand raised more authoritatively than Snape's. Harry figured that Dumbledore must have learned long ago to never underestimate any opponent, because his posture was no different than it was prior to his duel with Voldemort.

On Harry's right was Tonks, and she was behaving even more differently than normal. Although her wand was raised in a similar manner to Dumbledore's, their facial expressions were completely opposite. Where Dumbledore's was a steely visage of determination to see his desired result come to fruition, Tonks' seemed to tell Harry that she was on his side. Harry stared deeply into her now-orange irises and suddenly heard Tonks' voice in his head. Run to me, Harry! I'll Apparate us to safety!

Harry gave a tiny start, but still caught Tonks give him a tiny nod of confirmation. This was all the prompting Harry needed and he broke to Tonks' side. The instant he grabbed her hand, Harry felt a most curious tingling sensation all over his body, and suddenly, he was standing in the entrance hall of Number 12, Grimmauld Place.

He turned to Tonks to ask what was going on, but the Auror shook her head quickly and whispered urgently, "There's no time, Harry, we must enact great-grandfather's wards to protect this place. You're owner of the house, just yell 'Wards activate,' and everyone will be sealed out."

Harry did, and not five seconds later, a whooshing noise told him that two people had been turned away by the anti-Apparition wards. Satisfied that the house was now safe, Harry looked over to Tonks.

"Thank you, Tonks," he began, remembering the manners that Aunt Petunia had beaten into him. "Now, I don't mean to sound ungrateful, but why did you do that?"

"Because you are the Head of my family," Tonks replied simply. "You needed help that I could provide, so I did."

"Oh," was Harry's eloquent response.

"And besides that, you were right," continued Tonks, as though there had been no pause between her sentences. "Dumbledore's told us all the prophecy, or at least the part that Voldemort knows, and if you're going to stand any chance at all, you'll need all the help you can get. This house happens to be perfect for training you: it's got the Fidelius on it, so even if there weren't wards to prevent the Ministry from detecting magic, the owls couldn't find you and thus, justice couldn't be 'served.' Also, this house should hold an extensive library where you could learn all kinds of spells; all the old pureblood manors have them."

"But Tonks, what about the Floo? Dumbledore could burst into this room any second!" Harry motioned at the large fire crackling merrily not ten feet to his left.

Tonks' pupils grew wide, but after a second she shook her head. "No, if the Headmaster could come through the Floo, he'd have done it already."

"Still, I'm uncomfortable," said Harry with a touch of ambivalence, and he began to think. Who would know about the Floo system?

"KREACHER!" yelled Harry, after a minute of thought. Instantly the

old house elf appeared, grumbling something rather nasty about "bizarre, pink-haired, ill-bred blood traitors."

"Shut up, Kreacher," stated Harry authoritatively, and the house elf seemed surprised when he stopped talking.

"Much better," said Harry. "Now tell me, Kreacher, if people can enter this house through the Floo."

Suddenly, a vision came to Harry, a memory of the last time he had asked the elf a question.

Kreacher, tell me! Has he gone to the Department of Mysteries?

Master shall not return from the Department of Mysteries! Finally, Kreacher and his Mistress are all alone!

Harry's blood began to boil as two weeks' worth of repressed hate, anger, and utter sadness threatened to burst out of him. Harry saw red as Kreacher began to open his mouth to form a response; in a flash, his wand was out and the Killing Curse was on his lips.

But as Harry's lips began to form the first syllable of that most dreaded of curses and a small bubble of green began to form on the end of his wand, he felt a soft, warm something place itself on his shoulder. Harry looked to the side and saw Tonks grabbing his shoulder, pink eyes full of concern, head urgently shaking. "Not now," she mouthed, and Harry's rational brain took over his primal instincts. He could not kill the elf now, they needed so much information from him. His revenge would have to wait.

With a sigh, Harry looked down at Kreacher, who was staring up at him in abject fear. "Go on, Kreacher, but could you repeat that last bit? I got a little distracted."

Kreacher took a sizeable gulp, but bravely resumed talking. "As I was

saying, the Floo connection here is set to only allow only outbound travel and travel to the various Black residences," the elf stated surprisingly helpfully. "All other locations are only allowed to Floo call. As it should be, no need to allow filthy outsiders to besmirch and befoul the house of my Mistress and her ancestors!" he added, and Harry rolled his eyes at the elf's persistently negative attitude.

As if to emphasize the point, at that moment, the flames in the entrance hall fireplace suddenly flashed green and a head appeared where a particularly odd-shaped log had once been.

"Well that's odd," said the head confusedly, "I didn't mean to just make a call, I should've come straight through..." The head paused in thought, but then began to call out. "Hello, hello! Is anybody home?"

"Hermione!" exclaimed Harry, and he ran to sit in front of the fireplace. "What are you doing?"

"Hello, Harry, I was hoping you might be here! Isn't it so cool, I just got the Floo network installed at my house!" Hermione's face glowed spectacularly from the combination of extreme excitement and burning embers, but then she grew serious. "But listen, what's going on, Professors Dumbledore and Snape came to my house just now, demanding to know if I had been in contact with you or Tonks in the past few days. He seemed really urgent, Harry, has something gone wrong?"

"I'm not sure, Hermione, I had a really odd run-in with him today. How about if you come through so we can talk about it. Kreacher!" Harry yelled again, only to find that the elf had not left his side. "Could you tell me if there is any quick way to modify the Floo connection to allow another location to come through?"

"Kreacher could, but does not wish to enable a stuck-up Mudblood to enter the most Noble and Ancient House of Black!"

Harry was sorely tempted to Crucio the elf for saying such things about his best friend, but did not want to do so in front of said best friend. Instead, he settled for glowering maliciously at the insolent serving beast and growled, "Kreacher, as Lord of the House of Black, I order you to tell me how to quickly grant my friend safe passage into this house through the Floo system!"

Kreacher sighed. He couldn't disobey a direct order from his master. "Fine, you great imbecile, you merely have to yell at the house to grant her passage." Kreacher followed this instruction with a lengthy series of muttered ruminations on the natural inferiority of the offspring of Mudbloods and blood traitors, but Harry wasn't paying attention. He had already directed the house to allow Hermione through, and moments later, the curly-haired brainiac was dumped unceremoniously out of the fireplace. The ungraceful nature of Hermione's arrival brought another round of scorn from the house-elf, but Harry helped her to her feet and gave Hermione a hug all the same.

"How are you doing, Hermione?" Harry asked warmly as they broke apart, but this was apparently the wrong question to ask.

"How the bloody hell do you think I'm doing!" cried Hermione, her mood shifting faster than a nervous student driver. "My Headmaster barges into my house demanding information about my best friend, who happened to have been on trial for murder; my other best friend, who is as dear to me as a brother, but only as a brother, asks me out and then calls me a cheap harlot when I refuse! Meanwhile, 30 people, Muggles and wizards, have been killed in the past week by the forces of Lord Voldemort, and the Dementors, werewolves, vampires, and most of the giants seem ready to join him any second, meaning that number is likely to triple or even more! Fudge has somehow managed to stay in office, and although he now acknowledges Voldemort's return, he's not doing or preparing to do anything about it!" Hermione took a deep breath. "So I guess, in brief,

I've had better weeks." She punctuated this sentence with a sarcastic little smile at the end and began to hum.

For his part, Harry was shocked. He couldn't recall Hermione ever giving such a violent outburst, although her fight with Ron following the Yule Ball may have rivaled this. Sensing his concern, Hermione resumed talking. "I'm sorry, Harry, I didn't mean to frighten you. It's just been a really tough week." She gazed down at her feet, but quickly shot up to stare Harry in the eyes. "So tell me about this run-in, Harry."

And so Harry told the story of what had transpired that evening in and in front of Gringotts bank, with occasional input from Tonks, who knew something of Dumbledore's behavior over the previous three days. At the end, Harry explained to Hermione that he planned on training with Tonks there at Grimmauld Place for the rest of the summer, a practice that hopefully could be continued during the school year. Hermione's response upon hearing this was immediate and to the point, "I want in."

"You do realize, Hermione, that this will mean you need to live here at Grimmauld Place?" asked Tonks.

"Yes of course I knew it meant that," snapped Hermione, "and I want to do it."

"You know it won't be easy, right?" asked Harry, and he was dignified only with a withering glare from his friend. "No, that's not what I meant," Harry added immediately, "I mean, of course you realize that training with an Auror wouldn't be a walk in the park, but I meant it won't be easy psychologically. I'm sure we're going to study and practice the Dark Arts, and I don't know how comfortable you are with that."

This did seem to give Hermione momentary pause, but she quickly worked through it. "Well, yes, if we're going to defeat the Death

Eaters, it makes sense that we'll need to beat them at their own game. Stunners will only get us so far, after all. Besides," Hermione continued determinedly, "I'm not sure how secure Azkaban will be with all the Dementors gone, so if we were only to arrest them, we might be fighting them again the next day. This is a war, one where we cannot afford to take prisoners. I think I can put aside my reservations if it means we can win the war."

"Good," said Tonks, startling Hermione, who hadn't noticed the Metamorphmagus yet. "Then let's get started."

For the next week, Harry, Hermione, and Tonks spent most of their time in the library. It was a grand place, full of rich mahogany shelves, Persian rugs, gold-framed portraits of former Lords, and many a fireplace surrounded by couches and comfortable regency wing chairs, perfectly designed for curling up and reading well into the night. This was apparently the one part of the house Kreacher had not neglected during the Black Family's extended absence, as everything was polished, dusted, and looking brand new.

The books themselves were quite more diverse than Harry had expected. Instead of a library devoted entirely to the Dark Arts, which he expected from such an old, Dark-favoring family, what seemed like all the magical subjects were represented rather equally. There were portions of the library devoted to each of the Hogwarts subjects, as well as Warding, the Mind Arts, Animagi, Goblin Relations and Finance, Dealing with Muggles (strangely, at least for Harry, most books here did not describe favored methods of killing non-magical folk), and even a shelf of books written by Nicolas Flamel devoted to the subject of Alchemy. There was a rather extensive section on the Dark Arts, but Harry found that reading more than a few was redundant, most of the ones in English contained the same or similar curses (Harry didn't see much difference between the Intestine-Ripping Curse and the Disemboweling Hex), and each tome prefaced itself with a rather annoying bit approximating, "Magic is neither light nor dark, it is all about intent," followed by some silly

anecdote about killing a wizard with a first-year spell. It was thought-provoking the first time Harry read it, but soon it had Harry wanting to explore the Necromancy section, so that he might reanimate the authors for the sole purpose of killing them. Yes, that would be highly satisfying.

Harry had not yet forgotten that amazing feeling he had gotten when he killed Uncle Vernon. It was a small, but almost ever-present thought in the very back of his mind. That was fun. Maybe I'd like to do it again.

He hadn't yet told Hermione or Tonks, nor anyone else, about this new feeling, and he doubted he ever would. To be honest, the thought frightened him greatly. Since when do I want to kill people? This is totally against all that is decent and human!

But still, he fantasized. Once, he had been sorely tempted to scratch this itch, when Kreacher had surprised him during a prolonged fireside reading of Finding Your Inner Core. He had jumped out of his chair at the popping noise, and instantly had his wand in the elf's face, a tiny pin-prick of sickly green light shining from the end of it.

But Hermione was there. He wouldn't kill a house-elf in front of Hermione. He wouldn't kill, period, in front of Hermione, he told himself furiously. But that little voice in the back of his head said, Not yet.

Author's Note Ok, so thanks again to all the people who have reviewed the story so far, and another thanks to those who told me about the formatting error, I believe there were about 30 of you. Anyways, hope you like it, and please, if you have any questions, don't hesitate to PM me or, better still, bring it up on the discussion thread at [The link is in my profile](#). Peace!

Chapter 3: Sorrow

"Fuck!" Harry Potter's voice rang through the halls of Number 12, Grimmauld Place.

"Ass!" it came again, a short while later. Alerted by this unusual display of profanity, Tonks and Hermione rushed up the stairs and burst into the master bedroom. Inside, they were greeted with the view of an extremely disheveled-looking Harry fuming, head down, on his bed, tattered bottle-green robes hanging around his shoulders.

"My dress robes no longer fit," he stated simply, looking up and seeing the startled looks on the faces of the two women.

Hermione rolled her eyes at him, "Harry, would you quit fooling around? We have to go!"

It was true. Sirius' Will Reading was due to begin in less than an hour, and Harry was only just getting ready. Frustrated by the air of helplessness her best friend was putting on, Hermione repaired and enlarged Harry's robe, then sent him a venomous look that plainly said, "Get dressed...NOW!"

"Alright, sheesh, Hermione. I'll get dressed. I don't see what the hurry is, though, we can take a Portkey and be there in half a second," Harry grumbled as he shooed the pair out of his room. In truth, the Wizarding World's speed and ease of transportation was not the real reason for Harry's slow preparations.

In truth, he was dreading returning to Gringotts and having to confront the reality of Sirius' death again, and this time in front of so many witnesses. He was afraid of Dumbledore, and the lengths to which the aged Headmaster might go to force him back to the "safety" of 4 Privet Drive. However, he was most afraid of what he might learn about those people in attendance.

Harry had been rather comfortable for the whole of his life, by taking people at face value. The Dursleys hit him, hence, the Dursleys were bad. His classmates from school teased him; they were bad also. Ron and Hermione were his best friends; they were good. Dumbledore was grandfatherly and protective; he also was good. The world had been much easier to sort out.

But after the incident in Diagon Alley, his view on Dumbledore had been shattered. He had known previously that the Headmaster could be a bit controlling, perhaps more so than he had a right to, but Harry would never think that Dumbledore would resort to violence to make Harry do something. And if Harry had been wrong about Dumbledore, what else had he been wrong about? Hermione? Ron? Voldemort, even? If everything he believed was wrong, Harry was fairly sure he didn't want to know it.

But I have to know, thought Harry bitterly as he pulled on his robes. If he was going to survive, Harry knew that knowing who he could and could not trust was an absolute essential. He had to go to the reading.

What if someone wants me to think they're trustworthy, though, thought Harry, they'll still probably act normally around me. A dilemma. How could he be there without them knowing it?

Harry pondered this topic all the way to Diagon Alley (Hermione, having never ridden the Knight Bus, insisted on taking it, resulting in a thoroughly unnecessary 20 minute detour as it dropped off other passengers). Finally, outside of the Leaky Cauldron, it struck him.

"Tonks," he said, turning to the young Auror. "Disillusion me."

"Professional wrestling is faked," Tonks replied. "George W. Bush stole the American elections. Your face won't freeze like that if you keep it that way too..." but Harry cut her off.

"No, damn it, cast a Disillusionment Charm on me!"

"Oh," said Tonks, looking rather abashed, and then she rapped Harry's head with her wand. Harry felt the familiar yet still uncomfortable sensation of a cracked egg running down his scalp and knew he had disappeared.

"OK, Tonks, Hermione, listen closely. I was grief-stricken over Sirius' death and decided not to come. Got it?"

His female housemates looked a touch confused, but agreed nonetheless. Tonks held open the door to the Leaky Cauldron, and allowed Harry to pass through. For the rest of the walk through Diagon Alley, Harry walked between the girls, figuring this to be the best way to avoid running into anyone and causing a panic. Finally, after three very close calls, they made it to Gringotts running a minute or two late.

The trio began looking around wildly, desperate to find the room where the reading would be held, and thankfully, there was a goblin waiting in the lobby for this very purpose.

"Ms. Granger and Ms. Tonks, I presume," said the goblin. It wasn't a question. "Good, now we can start the reading, if you will follow me." The goblin beckoned imperiously and began leading the three through the maze that was Gringotts bank. Finally, he stopped outside a tall, oak door bearing the legend "Reading Room" on a brass (or was it gold?) plaque at eye height.

The goblin rapped the door with his knuckles and it opened outward, nearly smashing Harry in the face. "Here you are Ms. Granger and Ms. Tonks, I wish you a good day." The goblin started to leave, but stopped and muttered, "And as for you, Lord Black-Potter, that is a most impressive Disillusionment Charm." Then the goblin strolled away as though nothing had happened, leaving the three to enter unassisted.

The Reading Room was a squat rectangular room, perhaps 100 feet long and 40 feet deep from the entrance. The walls and floors were all of Gringotts' signature white marble. At the end of the room directly opposite the door was a long, highly polished, oak table, raised up slightly from the floor by a small, marble stage. The rest of the room was taken up by short, oaken stands, three or four rows high, and divided in the middle by an appropriately thick aisle. Torches hanging all along the walls gave the room a low, somber lighting.

As Tonks and Hermione were the last benefactors of the Will to arrive, the room was already relatively crowded. On the left sat a good number of the Order of the Phoenix, including all the Weasley family, Remus, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Mad-Eye Moody, Snape, and, unsurprisingly, Professor Dumbledore.

This must be a public reading, thought Harry, knowing that the last four were not named in the Will.

Harry's thoughts on the matter were confirmed when he saw who was sitting on the right. There sat three people Harry knew Sirius would never include, even had he not seen the Will before: Draco and Narcissa Malfoy and Blaise Zabini. The two Malfoys were sitting as far away from the Order members as possible, and occasionally shot murderous looks towards the group, and Dumbledore in particular. Blaise was sitting with Draco and looking entirely uninterested in all his occasional attempts at making conversation with her. She was staring intently at the door Harry, Tonks, and Hermione had just come through, as though waiting desperately for something.

Behind the table sat the five goblins who had been present at Harry's reading of the Will. Grabtooth sat in a throne-like chair at the center of the table, and upon seeing Tonks' and Hermione's entrance, he banged his gavel.

"Excellent," said the goblin, as he smoothed his expensive suit. "Now that all named parties in this Will are present, we can proceed with the reading."

Grabtooth adjusted his monocle and picked up the paper before him and opened his mouth as though to begin reading, but found himself cut off by Fred.

"Excuse me sir, but what about Harry Potter? Isn't he named? Don't we need to wait for him?"

Tonks spoke up at this, "Harry sends his regrets that he will be unable to attend, but he finds that it is too soon after Sirius' departure for him to face the divvying up of Sirius' assets. Harry sends his best regards to you all." Tonks gave the crowd a curt nod and sat down.

Grabtooth looked around to see if there were any more questions, and then began the reading of the will. As the goblin did so, Harry snuck off to a corner in the front of the room where he could study everyone's faces.

The first benefactor was Remus. When he heard his named called, the werewolf let a single tear trickle down his face, and was visibly biting his lip to stop a quivering that could be seen despite his efforts. His shaky composure died when he heard Sirius' condition on receiving the inheritance, and he let out a flood of tears at the last sentence, "Now go and have fun."

"I will, Padfoot," vowed Remus, his voice barely above a whisper, and a few years seemed to instantly melt off Remus' face.

Tonks was genuinely surprised when she learned the figure Sirius had left her. Harry had not told either of his housemates what they had inherited, or even his own figure, and Tonks, coming from a middle-class mixed blood household, was absolutely floored. She

kept repeating, quietly, "Thank you, Sirius. Thank you, Sirius," like a mantra.

If Tonks was blown away, it was nothing compared to the reaction of the Weasley family upon hearing Arthur's portion. Charlie, Bill, and the twins sat, dumb-struck, jaws agape, completely incapable of moving. Ginny burst into tears and wailed something about not wanting the money, she wanted Sirius. Molly fainted dead away, and Arthur just looked at his feet. Ron, meanwhile, was sitting with his hand at his mouth, apparently trying and failing to hold in a smile.

Ron's smile grew broader as he heard Hermione's share. Hermione, meanwhile, merely nodded, stony-faced but downcast, and Harry heard her take a deep breath through her nose. His face fell like a stone, however, upon hearing his own share. "500,000 Galleons!" Harry saw him mouth. An angry flash passed through the redhead's eyes and he glared murderously at Hermione. Suddenly, though, the eyes softened, and a calculating gleam replaced the fire.

Severus Snape had another interesting face to watch. He was rolling his eyes with each personal message, but each time a Galleon amount would be delegated, he winced, not as though from annoyance that Gryffindors were being given so much cash, but it was as though he saw each delegation as a personal affront. What is this, thought Harry, He can't possibly have been expecting anything.

At the end of Reading, the Malfoy scion jumped to his feet almost before the goblin had finished the last sentence and yelled, "I contest this Will! The Black estate cannot go to Potter, he is not of Black blood!"

Grabtooth gave the blonde a withering stare. "Were you not paying attention, Master Malfoy? The money was left to Harry James Black-Potter. Lord Black-Potter was adopted by the late Lord Black prior to his death, making him completely eligible for this inheritance. Does anyone else have any idiotic complaints," the goblin finished

snidely.

As it was, there were no more idiotic complaints, and the group began to file out. The Malfoys and Blaise left first, the first two plainly dealing with a great amount of anger. Blaise looked highly disappointed about something, though for the life of him, Harry couldn't fathom what that was about, either. I don't even know her, he thought, how could she be expecting something from Sirius?

Following them out were Dumbledore and the non-beneficiary Order members Shacklebolt, Moody, and Snape swept out, sticking close behind the Slytherins in case they started anything in their anger. Dumbledore wore the same expression Blaise had, but it seemed that more cogs were turning in his head than in the blonde's.

Tonks, Hermione, and the Weasleys were the last to leave the Reading Room, though Ron hung back slightly. The youngest Weasley male took hold of Hermione's upper arm as she walked through the door and led her off to the side; Harry moved to follow his best friends, but Grabtooth's voice held him back.

"Lord Black-Potter," said the goblin, just loud enough for Harry to hear but still soft enough that it did not carry in the acoustically tuned hall. "A message has arrived for you from the front desk." He motioned at a heavy envelope of ivory paper and subtly held it up for the young Lord's taking.

Harry walked back to the table and accepted the proffered envelope. Breaking the golden seal, Harry read the note inside.

Dear Harry,

Ah, how you continue to evade me! I was hoping that you would be present today at your Godfather's Will Reading, because I have a matter of great import to discuss with you. It would not do to relay information of this nature in a note, nor would you likely believe this

information without first-hand proof. Because of this, I ask that you meet me in The Leaky Cauldron on your birthday. I believe you are to be in Diagon Alley that day anyway for your parents' Will Reading, so I hope this will not inconvenience you too much. Thank you for taking the time to read this letter.

Sincerely,

Blaise Zabini

Harry handed the letter back to Grabtooth. "Any idea what this is about," he asked.

"None, milord," said Grabtooth, "Although I would advise you to attend the meeting, Ms. Zabini has been most persistent in trying to talk to you for some time now. If my memory serves me, she seemed quite keen to talk to you following the trial as well."

"True," nodded Harry, a pensive look on his face. It cleared after a moment, and Harry extended his hand to the goblin. "Thank you for all your help, Grabtooth. I hope one day I'll be able to reciprocate."

Grabtooth gave an affirming nod as he shook Harry's hand, and then led the goblins out a back door. Harry exited through the main door, nearly running into Ron and Hermione, who were arguing in the hallway.

"Oh, come on, Hermione!" said Ron, incredulous. "Why not?"

"Ron, for the last time, I'm not staying at the Burrow this summer! There's a lot of work to be done..."

"Work? Hermione, there's no summer homework this year! Last year was O.W.L.s, remember?"

"I didn't mean school work, Ron. Harry needs to be training for the

war, and I for one plan on helping him all I can! Besides that, how could you even think I'd want to come to your home after the things you said about me."

"Mione, I told you I'm sorry about that. Please, give me another chance."

"Ronald Weasley, don't you dare try to use puppy-dog eyes on me, you're much too old for that to work!"

With that, Hermione whirled around and stomped off in the direction the rest of the group had gone.

Ron was fuming, and muttered angrily, "Won't go out with me, huh, well I'll show her!" He surreptitiously drew his wand and, after a glance each way down the hall, leveled it at Hermione. Ron opened his mouth to cast a spell, but before he could form the first syllable, a wand tip was poking his throat.

"Drop the wand, Ron," Harry growled, and his body shook with vindictive pleasure at having the boy powerless before him.

"H-Harry?" Ron stammered as he dropped the wand and looked wildly around for his assailant. "W-where are you?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Disillusionment Charm, idiot. Now, care to tell me which spell you were about to cast on Hermione?"

"W-what are you talking about, Harry? I wouldn't curse Hermione, she's my b-best friend!" Ron attempted a sheepishly innocent grin. Attempted was the key word.

In response, Harry merely poked the wand harder into Ron's neck, making him gasp and sputter. Still getting no response, Harry stared into Ron's eyes and focused all his thoughts on one word: Legilimens.

Ron had no magical defenses around his mind, and Harry broke in easily. Once inside his former best mate's head, Harry thought, Ron, I know you can hear this. I am inside your memories and I will find out which spell you were going to use on Hermione. If you tell me now and spare me the trouble of looking, however, you won't have a killer headache when I'm though. The choice is yours.

Alright, came Ron's grumbled reply, it was going to be Amor Infinitus.

Harry stumbled back in shock at the admission. Amor Infinitus was a spell first invented by Greek patricians to bind their concubines, and had since been used for a wide variety of purposes, from jealous husbands bent on keeping their wives faithful and obedient, to Dark Lords wishing to ensure a completely loyal group of followers. Its use had been criminalized in 1755 with the Unforgivable Curses Declaration, which placed it on a level just below that of the Unforgivables. That Ron had even heard of the spell, let alone nearly used it, was so mind-bending that it was all Harry could do to remain in the redhead's mind.

Harry's disbelief did not last long, however, as it quickly gave way to boiling anger. He forcefully pulled out of Ron's mind and hissed dangerously in the redhead's ear, "You're coming with me!"

Ron gave no resistance as Harry frog-marched him out of Diagon Alley. He made no motion to escape as Harry pushed him onto the Knight Bus and tipped Stan an extra four Galleons to visit Grimmauld Place first. Not even a single wild look entered his eye as Harry pulled him towards the edge of his London property.

But the moment Ron felt the tingle of the raised wards as Harry threw him across the threshold of the Black Estate, he started to panic. Please tell me that wasn't a Magic Cloaking Ward, Ron mentally begged, but he dared not ask aloud, for fear of angering Harry further.

Instead, Ron merely stared up into Harry's striking green eyes as his former best friend stood over him and raised his wand.

"You wished to harm my friend, Ron," said Harry with a calm that made vampires seem frisky. "I will no longer allow people to harm my friends."

Harry directed his wand at Ron's face, and Ron could see a small pinprick of red light starting to grow on the tip. Abruptly, the light went out, and Harry pulled his wand back toward his body.

Ron cracked a grin and began to sit up. "Good joke, Harry, I knew you wouldn't actually..." but then Ron's whole body went rigid and he fell back to the floor.

"I forgot," said Harry, still with the calm that should come only with death, "Mrs. Black hates loud noise." He jabbed his wand at Ron and cried, "Silencio!"

Oh no.

"I'm sorry, Ron," said Harry, and a single tear dropped from his eye onto Ron's cheek. Ron closed his eyes and waited for the inevitable. It came a second later.

"Crucio!"

AN: There you have it! Please review, you honestly have no idea how happy it makes me when I see those in my email. Just to clarify a few things in case anyone was wondering:

-For those of you who are already planning on telling me in your review that Tonks' comment about George W. Bush is anachronistic, you would be correct if I were following the widely accepted fanon timeline that has Harry born in 1980 and starting school in 1992. The

way I see it, J.K. Rowling has never established in her novels when precisely the action occurs and thus I feel free to reference the man. If I am wrong however, and someone would like to prove to me, using canon, that the fanon timeline is correct, I will of course duly note it, apologize for any anachronisms, and give you a shoutout on top of the next chapter.

-If anyone is having trouble picturing the Reading Room in their mind's eye, do a Google Image search for the main room of Princeton's Nassau Hall, and picture it done in marble rather than wood.

Again, thanks to those of you who have read the story, more thanks to those who have reviewed it, there are 137 of you at the time of this update and I love each of you to death, and as always, there is a complete discussion thread at Hopefully my next update won't take as long, school is starting on Wednesday, so I'm anticipating a light homework load for the next couple weeks. Until next time...

Chapter Four: The Library

Hogwarts Prefect Found Tortured by Death Eaters

By Penelope Clearwater, Staff Writer

In a gruesome attack sure to send shockwaves through the magical community, Ronald Weasley, 16, was found tortured to insanity behind a Knockturn Alley dumpster late last night, the Dark Mark floating over his body, Ministry officials say.

Weasley was rushed to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, where Healer Augustus Smethwyck promptly diagnosed Weasley with extreme overexposure to the Cruciatus Curse.

"Rarely have I seen a patient in this bad shape," said Smethwyck, who battled tears through the press conference. "That poor boy must have been tortured for hours."

The Ministry did not answer questions about which particular Death Eaters may have been behind the attack, although speculation is rampant that recent Azkaban escapee Bellatrix Lestrange may have been the culprit. Lestrange achieved international notoriety fourteen years ago when she led three other Death Eaters in an attack on Aurors Frank and Alice Longbottom, leaving the couple tortured to insanity.

No motive has been determined for the attack, although the Weasley family strongly opposed You-Know-Who in the first war, and has traditionally been known as fierce supporters of the Light. Also, several Hogwarts students have described Weasley as "the best friend" of Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, raising speculation among many in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement that the attack may have been retribution for Potter's role in capturing 11 Death Eaters and exposing You-Know-Who's return this June.

Potter has not yet issued a statement on the matter, and it is unclear whether he was informed of the attack.

"Ron Weasley was a fantastic individual," said a somber Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Weasley was a prefect who would have entered his 6th year at Hogwarts this September. He was Keeper of the Gryffindor Quidditch team, and is chiefly credited with their winning of the House Championship this past year thanks to a brilliant performance in the final match.

The Weasley family refused repeated requests for interviews, but family friend...

Hermione could read no further. She violently threw The Daily Prophet down on the rough wooden table that took up most of Number 12 Grimmauld Place's kitchen, and pushed the vile rag away from her. This had to be a joke, it had to be. Harry would come down for breakfast in a few minutes and he'd tell her it wasn't true, that he'd just spoken with Ron on the Floo. Hermione forced herself to believe everything would be all right.

But deep down, Hermione knew that this was no lie. One of her best friends was gone, as good as dead. He would rot, for the rest of his existence – for Cruciatus-induced insanity could not be reasonably described as life – in the Long-Term Care Ward, gazing emptily at the same spot on the ceiling, drooling slightly, maybe making a noise every so often to instill a sense of false hope in his well-wishers.

It was ironic, Hermione thought, that he would lay alongside Gilderoy Lockhart, whose Memory Charm would have landed Ron in that same ward some three years ago, had his broken wand not backfired. Hermione's eyes misted up as she thought of all the misadventures and near-disasters she and Ron had gotten into as they tried to support Harry in his quest for...what was Harry questing for? Truth? Justice? Vengeance? Hermione knew that it was not the eradication

of the Dark, at least not anymore. She could see the gleam he sometimes got in his eye when he looked at Kreacher, and knew Harry would eventually bring himself to use the Dark Arts against the elf. He might not have to do that much bringing at all, she mused, thinking of Vernon's fate.

And yet, somehow, Hermione could not bring herself to care. She still held her S.P.E.W. views that the elves should be liberated and treated as equals, but this one...Kreacher...

She repressed a shudder as she thought of the depths of the elf's betrayal. Though it hadn't showed much on the outside, Hermione really did care for Sirius. Much in the way her own friendship with Harry and Ron had begun with the troll incident, there was something about helping to literally save a man's soul that created an inexorable bond between the two. It was the reason she had received 500,000 Galleons more inheritance than Ron. Which was why Ron had flipped out at the Will Reading...

Hermione's fist shook as she grounded it into the table. What right did that no-class, no talent, ill-bred halfwit have to speak to her that way? Who was he to call her "a Knut whore," because she wouldn't go out with him? As if anyone, let alone her, would defile their body for such a paltry amount!

If she was honest with herself, Hermione would admit there had been a time when she was mildly attracted to Ron, but that was back when she thought she was too ugly and bookish to get anyone else. Seeing the look on the boys' faces at the Yule Ball had been enough to strip her of that notion, though, and ever since, Ron had completely fallen off her love radar. Lately, she had taken to viewing the boy as little more than poor comic relief, a distraction from what was truly important at a time when it was vital to stay focused on the task at hand.

Plus, there were all the things he said about Harry in his "Knut

whore" rant. All those horrible, mean, nasty, rotten, vile things. Hermione shuddered with barely controlled rage. How many times had Harry saved his life? How many times had Harry not taken the easy way out and instead taken the difficult stand for what was right? How many times had Harry distinctly said that he didn't want the fame, the fortune, the "fabulous" lifestyle? But despite all that, Ron insisted on his petty jealousies and refused to grow up and see the man Harry was, not the spoiled warrior prince Ron's mind had made him to be.

Hermione was suddenly thrust back into her memory, to the Triwizard Tournament, when Ron turned his back when Harry needed him the most. To the Yule Ball, when Ron lambasted her date and his former idol, Viktor Krum, blaming the Bulgarian for his own timidity in asking her out. To the entirety of the last year, when Ron burdened her with his responsibilities as Prefect, and then still had the gall to ask to copy her homework. What a fickle and mean-spirited boy!

Perhaps he had it coming. Maybe Ron deserved the fate meted out to him by the Death Eaters. It was poetic justice, Hermione observed. The Cruciatus Curse attacked the mind, deceiving it into believing the body was undergoing intense torture, much in the way Ron's disbelief in fourth year attacked Harry's deep-rooted mental scars from his isolation at the Dursleys'. In this way, might Ron's attackers have been right?

Hermione was pulled out of her musings by the sound of Harry's slippered feet coming down the long staircase to the kitchen. "Hey Hermione," he said, looking down upon his best friend with a warm grin. "How are you doing?"

Though her eyes were directed up at him, Hermione seemed downcast to Harry. He finished his descent of the stairs and walked to where she sat. "What's wrong," Harry asked, his eyes full of concern.

"Harry, something..." Hermione trailed off, trying to come up with the correct adjective, "something terrible happened."

"What's that?" asked Harry, though he knew what was coming. Ron's fate would outweigh anything else that may have happened yesterday.

"It's Ron, he...he..." Hermione's voice was hesitant, and her eyes betrayed her fear of a violent reaction from Harry. "He was tortured. By Death Eaters."

Harry arranged his face into a look of shock, and let out a slow breath. "How bad is he?"

"As bad as the Longbottoms."

I may have gone a bit far, Harry thought as he faked a horrified gasp. I really only meant for him to lose it enough that he wouldn't remember his attacker...oh well.

Harry set his face with steely determination and stared hard into Hermione's eyes. "Well then we'll have to keep fighting to avenge him," Harry said coldly. "And to do that we'll have to keep learning; come on up to the library, we're due to start with Tonks any minute now."

Hermione took Harry's outstretched hand and used it to help herself stand. The pair walked together back up the stairs and entered the library through its grand French doors. The teens walked up the library's Persian-rugged and gas-lighted central lane to the far wall. There, sitting in the room's signature wing chairs in front of a roaring fire, were Tonks, Mad-Eye Moody, and Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"How did you get in here?" Harry asked, his hand instantly drifting toward his wand. Harry was none too pleased to see Aurors in his house just a day after having used an Unforgivable Curse.

"Hello, Harry, it's good to see you too," said Kingsley grinned through his rich baritone. He turned to Moody, "My, my, it's not every day we get a greeting like that, is it Mad-Eye?"

"Aye, no it's not," grumbled the ex-Auror, focusing his real eye on Kingsley while his electric blue magical one whizzed around in its socket. "Damn the Blacks," he muttered as a high-pitched buzzing interrupted the beginning of his next sentence. He retrieved a Sneakoscope from the pocket of his robes. "Damn thing has gone off three times since we've been here."

"You still haven't answered my question," said Harry, his voice hard, his hand now clutching the handle of his wand. "How did you get here? The house is supposed to be sealed. And while you're at it, please explain why you are here."

Moody chuckled appreciatively, the ugly scar that was his mouth twisted into what Harry could only guess was supposed to be a smile. "I see you haven't forgotten to practice your **CONSTANT VIGILANCE!**" The last two words were inexplicably yelled, startling Harry and causing him to draw his wand. Moody smirked at the pinprick of sickly green light that had briefly flashed on the end of Harry's wand. "Interesting, Potter, very interesting," was his only muttered comment.

"I invited them here," said Tonks, who stood up from her chair and moved toward Harry and Hermione. "I've had you two studying in this library for a week now, but book learning can only take us so far."

Ignoring Hermione, who made signs of wanting to protest, Tonks continued. "If you want to do any good in your battle against Voldemort, you will need books, yes, but also the know-how to apply the theory and survive. No one, not even Dumbledore, has survived more fights than Mad-Eye Moody, and Kingsley here isn't the youngest Auror Captain since 1832 for nothing. Before you sit two of

the most accomplished duelers in all England, and – just your luck – they both are willing and eager to impart unto you their knowledge," she finished in a haughty, superior tone, and morphed her appearance to that of a stereotypical old librarian.

Kingsley gave Tonks a look as he rose imperiously from his chair. "Right," he said uncertainly, more than a little confused by her new appearance. "So, I think before we try to teach you anything, we'll need to test your current level. Duel me, Harry." Shacklebolt waved his wand and the bookshelves – along with Moody, Tonks and Hermione - flew away from the pair. Another wave and a dome of energy enveloped the room.

Harry assumed a fighting stance and thought briefly about what his first spell would be. Before he was ready, however, Moody yelled, "GO!" and Kingsley fired a stunner right at Harry's chest. The youth dove to left to avoid the curse and sent a stunner back at Kingsley, who blocked it and with a well-placed "Incarcerous!" incapacitated the boy.

The tall, black Auror smirked. "Come on, Harry! A first year could do better than that! We're going to try again, but this time try harder." Kingsley released the ropes and let Harry stand up again before freezing the ground beneath his feet. Harry immediately slipped and crashed hard on the ice. Shaking his head, Kingsley stunned the boy and quickly Enervated him again.

"The good duelist, Harry, does not rely merely upon curses. A little creativity is good, yeah?"

Harry merely snarled and gave Kingsley a murderous look, but before he could do anything about his anger, Harry found himself suspended upside down and being pummeled with conjured rocks.

Irate, Harry cried "Finite Incantatem!" and landed, cat-like, in a crouch. A Furnunculus Curse, Blasting Hex, Full-Body Bind, and

"Wingardium Leviosa!" later, and Harry was floating, powerless and winded, with a face covered in boils.

"You waste too much time striking dramatic poses, Harry," Kingsley lectured to the immobilized boy. "In the time it took you to land and look up at me menacingly – ah, yes, just like that – a Death Eater could have killed you four times over. There are no cameras here, Harry, and there won't be when you go into actual battle, either. And even if there were, no heroic lighting will change the fact that you died and the other guy lived."

Here, Kingsley leaned into Harry's ear and whispered fiercely, "I know you love dramatics and all that, Harry, and I know some day a huge statue of you will draw visitors from the world over, and that's all fine and fucking wonderful. But if you think for a second that I'm impressed with all your little escapades, think again. To me, you're nothing than a snotty-nosed little kid who's gotten too big for his britches after a few lucky shakes with the Dark Lord. Now when I release these curses, I want you to fight me like a man." Kingsley stalked away and flipped a "Finite Incantatem!" haughtily over his shoulder.

Harry was seeing red. Angrily, he jabbed his wand in Kingsley's direction and started shouting curses he read about that week.

"Abscindo Venas!"

"Carnificina!"

"Diffindo!"

"Deliquesco ossis!"

"Reducto!"

The sheer force of Harry's magic overwhelmed Kingsley, and though

the Auror's shield held, the force of the impacts sent him flying through the collapsing bubble and into a shelf, knocking dozens of books from their places, and it was all he could do to roll away from the rest of Harry's onslaught.

Meanwhile, Harry stalked over to the writhing heap that was Kingsley, his rage palpable in every step. His mind barely registered the shock and awe plastered all over Tonks' and Hermione's dropped jaws; all he knew was a burning, all-consuming desire to make this man suffer. Harry stopped his advance ten feet from Kingsley, and stood covering the man with his wand. Then, with a whisper more deadly than a nuclear bomb, Harry showed Kingsley just how much he hated Snape, Fudge, Umbridge, Ron, and Vernon – all those who habitually spoke ill of him and misconstrued his feelings toward his fame.

"Crucio!"

Kingsley had never known pain like this. All Aurors were subjected to the Cruciatus Curse early in their training – it was a fine way to separate the weak from the strong at the onset. His tormenter had been strong, but nothing like this.

Another time, about a year later, he had been drunk and made the mistake of making a pass at Barty Crouch's wife, who was quite a looker before the illness. Crouch, who was drunk too, became incensed and put Kingsley under the curse for a second before remembering himself. Crouch had been strong, but nothing like this.

The last time Kingsley had been under the Cruciatus Curse was during a routine raid on Borgin and Burke's, the infamous Knockturn Alley store known to cater to the needs of Death Eaters. Kingsley had gotten a little too close to a secret compartment that held some illegal potion or other and Mr. Burke, the co-proprietor, got a little antsy. Burkes, who would be sentenced to life in Azkaban, had been strong, but nothing like this.

As a primal scream ripped from Kingsley's lungs, he thought, Well, looks like the motivation tactic worked...

And then unconsciousness mercifully took the Auror out of his pain. Hermione knew, one way or another, this duel wouldn't turn out well. As Kingsley began humiliating Harry, she saw Harry's familiar helplessness overwhelm him. It's the Dursleys' fault, thought Hermione angrily as Kingsley flipped Harry upside down. Their abuse often shamed Harry, so he still doesn't respond well to it. She cringed as the stones began slamming into Harry's chest. No, this isn't going to end well at all.

But then a wave of something washed over Harry's features. His green irises seemed to stand more out more vividly than usual; indeed, all of Harry's body seemed to come into a sharper focus. The library had suddenly become like an image from television, only for some reason, Harry was being broadcast in HD.

She stared as Harry began pounding Kingsley with the powerful curses they had studied the past week and marveled at how excellently he performed them without having had any practice. Harry had never taken to any form of magic this quickly; Hermione was frankly bamboozled by how Harry could be doing this.

Then, Hermione saw it: that cruel gleam Harry sometimes got when he looked at Kreacher, the same gleam she had pondered not ten minutes previously. Was she right? Was it indeed Harry's omen of malice, his personal precursor to violence?

Hermione did not hear Harry speak the incantation, but knew instantly from the jet of red light that issued from his wand and the bestial scream that ripped from Kingsley's body which curse it was. She gasped, then watched in horrid fascination as the Auror thrashed and struggled in his torment. It was very easy to hate the concept of the Dark Arts in the abstract, academic realm as she had for all these years. But this, coming face-to-face with arguably the

worst of the Unforgivable Curses for the first time, this was something entirely different. There was almost beauty in the way Kingsley flailed, shrieked, and writhed; Hermione hated to think of it with that term but instantly knew the truth of it.

While Hermione was transfixed by Kingsley's torment, Mad-Eye Moody decided to end it. "Petrificus Totalus!" he yelled, and Harry fell sideways, stiff as a board, and knocked over another bookshelf. Moody limped across the room to Kingsley and helped him stand up shakily before releasing his spell on Harry.

Harry scrambled to his feet and stared at Moody with wide and fearful eyes. He had forgotten himself. He had used an Unforgivable Curse in front of three members of the Order and – potentially worse – in front of Hermione. The best possible outcome of this would be they would refuse to teach him any more, but all kinds of other nasty scenarios could play out, too. Hermione might never be friends with him again, Tonks might stop sheltering him from Dumbledore, he might be expelled from –

"Not bad, Potter," said Moody softly, cutting across Harry's thoughts, "although you may want to refrain from the Cruciatus Curse in battle situations; it tends to distract you and thus leave you open to attack from behind." Both of his eyes, magical and mundane, were boring into Harry's. Being examined in this way was quite as uncomfortable as the fear still gripping Harry's heart.

"I – I – I'm terribly s-sorry, P-P-Professor," stammered Harry, his mind racing wildly for a way to excuse his action. "I didn't mean – "

"Of course you meant to, Harry," said Kingsley as firmly as he could after his round of torture. "You can't perform the Cruciatus Curse at all unless every bit of you desires to. But not to worry," he added hastily, for Harry's head was beginning to droop, "I am not angry with you at all. Quite the contrary, in fact."

"Really," gasped Harry, perking up at this.

"Indeed, this marks a great step forward in your magical development," interjected Moody. He continued at Harry's perplexed look. "Dumbledore set out, from the very moment you defeated Voldemort in the first war, to instill within you an instinctive loathing of all the Dark Arts. Although the protection given you by your mother's sacrifice is indeed great, Dumbledore placed you with the Dursleys because he knew of their immense greed and materialism, and knew they were unlikely to treat you well. Greed is the primary reason witches and wizards go Dark, so Dumbledore's wish was for you to associate greed with the abuse you were sure to suffer at the hands of Vernon and Petunia, and it worked, did it not?"

Harry nodded, remembering his first meeting with Draco Malfoy, who had instantly reminded him of Dudley. Moody continued.

"Dumbledore, of course, is not a man who installs just one plan and prays for it to work on its own. No, he has used many other covert methods to stop you becoming Dark. Tell me, boy, how was it you met the Weasley family?"

Harry recounted the tale of his first trip to King's Cross Station, when he had heard Mrs. Weasley asking her children to remind her how to get on the platform.

"Did you ever think that was odd, boy?" asked Moody, almost incredulously. "Did you ever wonder why you weren't told how to access Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$? Or wonder why Mrs. Weasley would need reminding how to get on, having seen at least one of her children through that barrier for ten consecutive years, not to mention that she herself is a Hogwarts graduate?"

Harry started to say something, but Moody cut him off. "No, of course you didn't. Why would you? At the time, you didn't know anything about the Weasley family and even if you did, why should you care

what led to them taking you in? You had never had a friend before in your life until that point, so were you going to look a gift hippogriff in the beak? No.

"This was another of Dumbledore's plans, of course. The Weasleys are, bless them, wonderful people, but Molly in particular reveres Dumbledore more than most Death Eaters revere Voldemort. They also have a famous aversion to the Dark Arts, fueled mainly by a centuries-old feud with the Malfoy family. It does not burn as hot as it once did – they no longer engage in open battle – but the deep-seated hatred is still there. The feud was once an integral part of Wizarding folklore, in fact, much like that between the American Muggle families Hatfield and McCoy."

"Why did I never know about this," demanded Harry. He turned to Hermione, who had been strangely quiet. "Did you know about this fight?"

"I had heard some vague stories about it," said Hermione, "and Ron mentioned something about it once..." She broke off and grimaced, recalling the horrible misfortune of their friend, but recovered. "This sounds like the kind of thing we would have learned about in History of Magic, though, if it were as big as you make it out to be."

"You would," said Kingsley, "if you stayed on and took N.E.W.T. History, although with Binns as the professor...it's a wonder even I made it through, and I love History."

"Making sure you were close to the Weasleys was an important aspect of Dumbledore's plan," said Moody, returning to the subject. "As your first contacts in the magical world, they would introduce you to Wizarding values, including their own hard-line stance against the Dark Arts. The Weasleys' feud with the Malfoys provided an added bonus: if you befriended them, it would instantly put you at odds with Draco."

"But Draco and I wouldn't be friends anyway!" Harry protested. "Obnoxious wannabe-Death Eater git," he added under his breath.

"Don't be so sure," said Moody. "If you look at it objectively, you and he have a great deal in common. You come from old, rich, ennobled Pureblood families, you share a great deal of talent at Quidditch, and were it not for the façade of arrogance Draco feels he must keep up to impress his idiotic peers, he would be quite as powerful a wizard as you."

"But Malfoy's a miserable Seeker!" said Harry, who was desperately searching for other rebuttals to Moody's claims. He didn't like the idea of being compatible with Malfoy at all.

"A miserable Seeker, yes," conceded Moody, "but I bet you didn't know he was heavily scouted by the Tutshill Tornados when he played Chaser for the Wiltshire Waddlers Junior League team at age nine. My theory is that he switched to Seeker mainly as a result of his rivalry with you; he wanted to beat you at your own game.

"No matter what level of compatibility you might have with Draco, Dumbledore wished to ensure that it never developed into a friendship or alliance of any sort. Obviously, the Malfoys have no qualms about using the Dark Arts, and had Draco or Lucius met you before the Weasleys – or Hagrid, for that matter – there's little doubt they would have passed at least some of their beliefs on to you.

"Dumbledore had a number of other ways of ensuring you would not be tempted by even the smallest of Dark curses – Hagrid played large roles in many of them – and, so it seems, they worked beautifully until very recently. Correct me if I'm wrong, Potter, but until your little episode with Bellatrix Lestrange earlier this month was the first time you succumbed to the temptation to use the Dark Arts?" Moody asked, his piercing gaze forcing Harry to stare directly into the old, battle-scarred face.

"Yes," Harry agreed, "but I had still wanted to, hadn't I? There was a good long while when I wanted to kill Sirius more than anything, and even held him under my wand ready to do it. So I wasn't pure after all!"

"It is our choices that show what we truly are," quoted Kingsley, an odd ethereal note breathing through his rich voice. "I trust you've heard that line before? It's a quaint little chestnut that Dumbledore likes to use often, but it's also very true. You had every reason to kill Sirius that night and almost no reason not to. As did the rest of the world, you believed him to be a mass murderer, a Death Eater, and the man responsible for the slaying of your parents. If you killed him, you would have received a 10,000 Galleon reward and become an even greater celebrity than you already were. Even if you didn't know the Killing Curse yet, you were more than capable of producing a burst of pure magic that would have ripped him apart. There was no one and nothing to stop you killing Sirius that night, except yourself. You could not bring yourself to kill him, in spite of all the incentive to do so. That, Harry, is all the evidence you need to know that Dumbledore had succeeded, and you were pure as a snowflake."

"Returning to the point," said Moody, "your use of the Cruciatus Curse against Kingsley proves that your attacks on Vernon and Bellatrix were not flukes. You have thrown off the last vestiges of Dumbledore's anti-Dark Arts brainwashing attempt, and are now ready to become a useful fighter against the Dark."

"But I already am," began Harry hotly, but Moody cut him off.

"You have proven yourself a valuable nuisance for Voldemort," said Moody. "You have been courageous beyond anything that could have possibly been expected. But your insistence on using Stunners and Expelliarmus held you back considerably. Both spells can be useful in certain scenarios, when the main objective is to capture Death Eaters for questioning, but in pitched battle the pair are essentially useless. Most Death Eaters in the last war carried at least

one spare wand, making disarming them almost pointless, and obviously a Stunned Death Eater can be Enervated the second he goes down."

"Dark spells and curses, by contrast, give us the means to permanently incapacitate Death Eaters in a battle setting," said Kingsley, expanding Moody's point. "There are certain properties in Dark magic that inhibit the body's ability to heal. For example, if you lose a finger to the regular cutting spell, Diffindo, the Healers at St. Mungo's can reattach it or grow it back with Skele-Gro. Conversely, lose a finger to the Dark cutting spell, Sectumsempra, and it's gone for good. No one really understands why; the Unspeakables study the issue heavily but haven't come up with anything yet. But in the end, it really doesn't matter why, it only matters that. The Death Eaters do not hesitate to use these spells against us, so we must be willing to use them too, lest we be on uneven footing."

"What's the point of fighting them then?" asked Harry, who thought he knew, but had to be sure. "What are we fighting against if not the Dark Arts?"

"We're fighting for democracy, Harry!" said Kingsley, more than a little exasperatedly. "We're fighting for the rule of law, for the freedom of wizards, and against the extermination of Muggles. Most of all, though, we're fighting for the continued survival of wizardkind. Do you realize what would happen if Voldemort and the Death Eaters managed to kill off all the half-bloods and Muggleborns? Entirely pureblood families are a dying breed; without any other magical mates, they would all be entirely interbred within five generations. Six generations later, their genes would weaken to the point where they could no longer sustain magic. We would become a race of Squibs."

"Oh," was Harry's rather meek reply.

"Right, we've made good headway today, Potter," said Moody. "Kingsley and I will be coming over twice a week until school starts

up again, at which point we'll have to devise a new schedule. Practice what we teach you with Hermione and Tonks when we're not here, and you'll be a fine warrior before long. We'll take our leave now." With that, Kingsley and Moody abruptly started toward the library door.

"Wait!" Hermione cried, rushing over to prevent their departure. "How did you find out all that about Dumbledore and all?"

Moody's aged, battle-scarred face tilted down toward Hermione, and the ugly gash that was his mouth stretched into a smirk. "You didn't think Harry was the only reason Molly and Sirius fought, did you? Sirius agreed with Kingsley and I that we needed to use the Dark Arts against the Death Eaters, 'fight fire with fire,' as he always said. I've already told you about the Weasley's famous aversion to using those spells. Molly and Sirius got into a fierce argument about it one night in the middle of an Order meeting last December, and Molly let slip that Dumbledore wanted an example set for you. Sirius pieced together the rest over the next six months and told us when we signed on as witnesses to his Will. I got the feeling he had something else to say, but at that moment, Snape called to rally troops for the Department of Mysteries battle," Moody added, his scarred brow wrinkling further in apparent thought. After just a moment, however, he motioned to Kingsley and the pair completed their departure.

"Well," said Harry, who was struggling to retain his composure after being reminded of Sirius. He looked wildly around the room for something to say. "We should...er...should..."

"Are you okay, Harry?" asked Tonks softly, gliding as gracefully as she could to his side.

"I'm fine," he almost yelled, "it's just...we should clean up that mess over there!" Harry indicated the knocked-over shelves and books scattered all over the corner where he had dueled Kingsley. He turned away from the girls to begin the cleanup, but not before he

caught them sharing a concerned look. He ignored it.

The three began to put the room back together. Tonks offered to clear up everything with "a single wave" of her wand, but Harry and Hermione, fearing a catastrophe, said it would be more fun to do it by hand. After the bookshelves were set up in their proper spaces, they began replacing the books, glancing at the covers and skimming the contents as they did so. They worked in relative silence for about twenty minutes until Hermione's voice cut through the air.

"Oh, my!" she exclaimed, holding aloft a small, brown book. "Harry, Tonks, come look at this, it must be ancient!"

Harry strolled to her side and took the book into his own hands. It did look very old. The beaten and splotched leather cover was crudely attached to a thick piece of wood that served as a spine. The pages were of parchment, yellowed and torn by years of use. There was no title. It was the shabbiest thing Harry had ever seen in this glitzy library, save the time Kreacher had come grumbling in to make sure they weren't throwing things out.

Harry handed the book back to Hermione, who asked, "What do you suppose it is?"

"I don't know, why don't you open it and see?"

She hesitated, and Harry thought he understood why. They had encountered old books like these in the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts library, most of which were highly unpleasant either in their content or demeanor. Harry himself would never forget the book he opened during his first year that had literally screamed and given away his presence while he was looking for information on Nicholas Flamel.

"It's okay," said Tonks, reassuringly. "The Blacks were usually a nasty bunch, but they would never keep a book in the house that might

inadvertently hurt one of the children."

Slightly mollified, Hermione opened the book, flinching as she did so. Nothing happened. Relieved, all three leaned in to try and read the first page.

"I don't understand it," said Tonks, staring at the single line of flowing script with incredulity.

"Nor do I," said Hermione, looking equally perplexed. "That's not the English alphabet, nor is it any Ancient Rune I've studied before...isn't this odd, Har – Harry what's wrong?" she cried.

Harry's eyes were wide with a mixture of amazement and fear. He stared at the page, not daring to believe what had just happened. As he scanned the page, his brain couldn't comprehend the strange, loopy symbols any more than Hermione or Tonks. But as his eyes reached the last glyph, a soft hissing voice seemed to emanate from the book itself.

"Here lies the collected writings, teachings, and discoveries of Salazar Slytherin."

Author's notes: Alright, so there you have it! The latest chapter, just over a year in the making! I want to apologize once again for keeping you guys waiting for so long, I've posted a lame series of excuses and explanations on my profile if you're interested.

In my Author's notes at the end of last chapter, I challenged anyone to prove the fanon timeline to me, using canon. A number of you pointed out that in the second book, Nearly Headless Nick celebrates his 500th Deathday, saying that he was killed in 1492. This, of course, means that the action of the second book takes place in 1992-1993, and we can infer other dates from there. However, in the first book, on page 123 of the American hardcover, Nearly Headless Nick tells Harry "I haven't eaten for nearly four hundred years." If we follow this

timeline, then we can pinpoint the action of the series as taking place around 1890, assuming that Nick's deathdate of 1492 is correct. Obviously, that was sarcasm; there is no way the series could possibly take place in the 19th Century, or really, at any point before the late 20th Century. My point is this: J.K. Rowling intentionally left conflicting clues on how when the action takes place, precisely because we shouldn't know. A large part of the appeal and joy of Harry Potter is that we imagine that it is in the present, that this magical world continues to thrive all around us, and that we ourselves might come in contact with its characters. But thank you again to all those who took the time to tell me why the timeline is the way it is.

I really have been stunned by the overwhelming response to this fic. If you don't know, this story has now recieved 209 reviews (almost entirely positive reviews, and not a single flame), been placed on 170 of your Favorites lists, is included in 174 C2 groups, and 471 of you recieved an alert when I posted this chapter. All of it means a tremendous deal to me, and I thank each and every one of you who has taken time out of your day to read my writing.

Now to respond to some of your reviews:

Bobboky: First of all, I appreciated your review because you really thought out what you were saying. I think from this chapter you can see that even though Harry is using the Dark Arts, he isn't neccesarly evil...yet. I haven't entirely decided which side Harry will ultimately reside on, but for the time being, he maintains his core belief in democracy and freedom for all.

Jsdailey: You took the words right out of my mouth

Ranger Dragen: If I told you that, I'd spoil all the fun! Keep reading to find out what happens

PG Hammer: It'll be a chapter or two before you find out what

happens with Blaise

All those who wrote to say Ron got what was coming to him: I'm glad we agree.

Until next time...

Chapter Five: Slytherin's Hope

Confusion. Harry Potter's brain was filled with it. Why would Salazar Slytherin's ancient manuscript be here, in the Black family's London Estate? Voldemort was the last descendant of Slytherin, wasn't he? Surely, Harry would have heard about it if this book were widely circulated, so it must be an heirloom, right?

Harry's thoughts were interrupted by Hermione, who asked again, "Can you read it, Harry?"

He looked up at her, eyes still wide. "Yes," he breathed. "It's Slytherin's!"

"Slytherin's?" she asked, skeptical. "How do you know?"

"It just told me so, I think its been enchanted to speak Parseltongue. Turn the page, I want to see if it does it again."

Hermione turned the page, and again there was a series of intricately swirling lines, although this time they seemed to be organized in a list. As Harry's eyes skimmed down, he once again heard the voice.

"Table of Contents.

Section One...How Muggles and Mudbloods Endanger Wizardkind

Section Two...Discourses on the Natural Superiority of Pureblood Wizards

Section Three...Ruminations on the Formation of the Hogwarts School

Section Four...On the Art and Practical Applications of Conversing with Snakes

Section Five...A Discussion of the Nature and Proper Methods of War

Section Six...Of New Spells, Potions, and Invocations

"This is incredible," breathed Hermione after Harry repeated the voice's reading. "This must be one of the most important finds in Wizarding history! All of Slytherin's writings were supposed to have been lost in the Great Hogwarts Fire of 1229!" At Harry and Tonks' incredulous looks, Hermione sighed, "One of these days, I swear I'll force you to read Hogwarts, A History."

"True, but isn't it more curious that we found the book here?" asked Harry, ignoring Hermione's last comment. He turned to Tonks. "I mean, it's not like the Blacks were in Slytherin's line, right? Voldemort is supposed to be the last descendant."

"We could check the family tapestry for some kind of link," said Tonks thoughtfully, "But I'm sure if there were anything I would have heard about it from my mother, she was constantly telling us of the misdeeds of our ancestors and warning us not to turn out like they did. If there was ever a wizard who would've raised her ire, it was Salazar Slytherin."

"Just because he wanted to keep Muggle-borns out of Hogwarts?" asked Harry. "I mean, that's not good but I'm sure the Black family has done worse."

"They have," agreed Tonks, "and if you want, I could tell you hours worth of stories about the nefarious ways they amassed that colossal fortune you just inherited. But as bad as they may have been, Slytherin was much worse. He loved nothing more than causing the deaths of Muggles on gigantic scales. You may have heard about the Crusades when you went to Muggle school," Tonks asked.

"I don't remember much, but I have heard of them," said Harry, nodding.

Tonks adopted a scholarly tone. "Well, you may recall that the First Crusade was sparked in essence by a sermon Pope Urban II in 1095 to an assembly of French nobility known as the Council of Clermont. In this sermon, Urban told of the plight of Emperor Alexius I Comnenus, leader of the Byzantine Empire, whose territory was being overrun by Arab conquerors. Borrowing St. Augustine of Hippo's justification for a holy war, Urban implored the nobles to stop the petty feuds between them and combine their forces to fight the 'infidels' who had conquered Jerusalem and were encroaching on another Christian state.

"Under any normal circumstances, this speech would not have gone over well. The French were largely as adverse to full-scale war then as they are today, and had no particular economic interests in the continued existence of the Byzantines, who, frankly, were in nowhere near as much danger as Urban made them out to be. It is quite likely that, had there been no external interference, the idea of Crusades would have died that night.

"However Slytherin, who was nearing the end of his life and looking for one last way to strike the Muggles, got word that this conference was to take place from his wealthy English acquaintances, who were much more up-to-date with the Muggle world than their modern equivalents. For all his misconceptions about Muggles, Slytherin understood the way religious figures can make Muggles commit horrendous acts they would never consider otherwise. So, recognizing the potential this sermon had, Slytherin attended the Council disguised as a monk and began systematically Confunding key members of the audience. As Urban reached the part of his sermon where he began his call for war, the bewitched nobles began yelling 'Deus lo volt!' Latin for 'It is God's will!' Their passion stirred the rest of the congregation, and soon the whole assembly was chanting the slogan. War was inevitable from that point onward, and

Slytherin died happily just a few years later, having successfully sparked a series of wars that would continue for two centuries, one of the bloodiest conflicts in human history."

"That's incredible," breathed Harry, who was grudgingly awed by the evil genius Slytherin displayed in this tale. "I thought Slytherin was killed in a duel with Gryffindor though," he asked, looking quizzically at Hermione, whose face displayed a similar mix of disgust and amazement.

Seeming to snap out of it, Hermione shook her head. "That's a common myth," she said. "In reality, Slytherin and Gryffindor did have a duel over whose philosophy would carry in Hogwarts, which Gryffindor obviously won. But Slytherin left that duel very much alive."v

"Anyways," said Tonks, who plainly missed having attention for a reason other than setting off Mrs. Black's portrait, "I'm sure if the Blacks were in Slytherin's line, I would have heard all about that story and many others from my mother. As it was, I learned all that from N.E.W.T. History of Magicvi, which means I'm just as lost as you are as to how this book got herevii. It would certainly seem to be the kind of thing to be handed down by the generations. We should probably put it back though, if it speaks Parseltongue, who knows what other nefarious magic is at work in this book..."

"No, I think I'd like to read it," Harry overrode her. "Know thine enemy, right?"

"I suppose," said Tonks, "but be careful with it, Merlin knows what's in there..."

After assuring Tonks he would, Harry took the book from Hermione and retreated to his bedroom to read, if that's what listening to a disembodied snake whispering in his ear as his eyes scanned the page could be called. Though he only got through the first section,

"Of Muggles, Mudbloods, and Squibs" before the girls called him down for lunch, he learned a great deal. As it turned out, Slytherin was not merely motivated by some random, blind hatred for those who were without magic. It seemed, from the almost primal desperation with which Slytherin wrote about anti-magical persecution, that the Flame Freezing Charm and Apparition, the two greatest tools wizards and witches had to escape fanatical Muggles, had yet to be invented, meaning that several witches and wizards were being killed in a most horrendous manner. At the time, it seemed that Muggles were only aware of the existence of Muggle-born wizards and the occasional isolated band of witches who lived a minimalist existence in the woods. Slytherin's main rationale for excluding Muggle-borns from Hogwarts was an intense fear that Muggles might discover the larger Wizard society through their magical children. Slytherin believed that if Muggles were to find out about the centers of Wizarding life at Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade, and someplace Harry had never heard of called Wryvensgord, they would come en masse and overwhelm the magical defenses with sheer numbers. In this scenario, wizard-kind would be wiped out.

Slytherin also wrote a great deal of essays on the natural inferiority of Muggle-born wizards and the general contemptible nature of Muggles, written in a style that suggest they were designed for a large audience, perhaps distributed by a fleet of owls and a Duplicus charm. It seemed to Harry like Slytherin had not really believed what he wrote in these essays; they lacked the urgency and passion he saw in the dire predictions of an anti-wizard genocide. Harry thought these letters were more to try and play on latent racism and draw more wizards to his side of the debate. The dehumanizing anti-Muggle message in these letters may also have been intended to create an image of Muggles as some sort of perfect demon that wizards would be entirely justified in seeking to slaughter in revenge.

Harry filled the girls in on what he had read over Kreacher's surprisingly good steak and kidney pie. Hermione looked like she had a comment to make, but before she could open her mouth, a

phoenix literally burst into existence over the table and flew over to the arm of Harry's chair.

"Hello Fawkes," said Harry as the phoenix trilled sadly and presented him with a scroll. "What have we here?" Harry unrolled the parchment and read.

Dear Mr. Potter

As you may have read in The Daily Prophet this morning, your good friend Mr. Weasley was captured and tortured by Death Eaters yesterday. Though The Prophet has been known to sensationalize and exaggerate details of attacks in the past, it is unfortunately factual in this case. Mr. Weasley's sanity is beyond repair, the best that can be done now is to ensure he lives out the rest of his days in comfort.

As hard as this must be, I feel I must remind you that you are a public figure and will be expected to give public comment. If they have not arrived already, you will soon receive owls from Ministry spokespeople, reporters from The Prophet and other media outlets looking for a statement. Despite your grief, you must say something strong and positive. The Wizarding Public needs a hero right now, they need some glimmer of hope in what has very rapidly become a time of darkness.

In regards to our last meeting, I hope you hold no residual ill feelings toward me. The goblins are a calculating and conniving race of creatures and I panicked when I heard you were associating with them. I would advise you to keep further dealings with goblins to an absolute minimum as I wouldn't want their unorthodox views to bring you to any sort of harm. In fact, I ask that you not return to Gringotts this summer and instead conduct any business you have with the goblins via owl.

I have been reviewing the safety measures around 12 Grimmauld

Place since you took up residence there and I am satisfied that they will indeed protect you, so I have decided to allow you to remain. I understand that Ms. Tonks and Ms. Granger are accompanying you, a situation I do not seek to remedy. Hopefully some of their more studious natures will rub off on you.

Regards,

Albus Dumbledore

"What is it," asked Hermione when Harry snorted upon finishing the letter.

"Oh, nothing," said Harry casually, though with a little bite in his tone, "Typical Dumbledore blither and blather. Apparently, I am now 'allowed' to stay here, as though he could kick me out of my own house. Also, no Gringotts visits for me and I 'must' issue a statement about Ron." Harry sobered, remembering he was supposed to be sorry about the fate his one-time best friend had met. Hermione dulled too and there was a moment in which neither of them knew what to say.

They were spared the indignity of an awkward silence, however, when several owls flew into the kitchen. Tonks helped Harry relieve all the owls of their burdens while Hermione went through and saw who the letters were from.

"The Daily Prophet...The Quibbler...Le Magnifique...The New York Times Magical Edition...yes, they're all the same," Hermione said, scanning the stationery of the parchment.

"So Dumbledore was right about the statement thing," groaned Harry, who had never been a fan of the press.

"Mhm," said Hermione distractedly, now poring through the contents of the letters. "The Wizarding Wireless Network is willing to pay you

five thousand Galleons if you will give them an exclusive interview about everything that has happened this month. There are competing offers from the Wizard Divisions at Al-Jazeera and Bertelsmann, and some American firm I've never heard of called ESG wants to bring you to San Francisco and create some sort of spectacle. They're offering the best package: fifty thousand Wampum up front, 150 thousand in royalties afterward along with full accommodations and first-class transportation to and from the States."

"As if I need the money," Harry snorted to cover that he had never heard of Wampum before. "An exclusive interview might be the best way to go, though. If I give a non-exclusive to someone, the rest of them will never let up on me. What's the exchange rate between Wampum and Galleons?"

"Its about two Wampum to the Galleon," Tonks informed him, "But frankly, I wouldn't take ESG up on their offer. There are too many pressing issues here to go off on holiday to America."

"Like what?" asked Harry, who was frankly intrigued by the former Colonies. "I mean, it's not like I can really do anything about Voldemort this summer. Save Krum and Fleur, I've never met foreign wizards before and I've certainly never traveled. I think it might be a good experience. Besides, Voldemort hasn't got power with the Yanks, does he? I'd be safe there."

"That you would," allowed Tonks, "but you are greatly mistaken if you think Voldemort is the only issue confronting you this summer. Did you think you could just inherit a huge amount of money from Sirius, deposit it in the bank and that'd be the end of things?"

Harry said nothing. He had indeed thought all matters with the Black estate were over and done with, but judging from Tonks' tone, he had been mistaken.

"I haven't brought up any of this with you yet because I figured I'd give you some time to become accustomed to your wealth, but there are many formalities that come with being Lord Black," said Tonks forcefully. "First, according to tradition, you must engage in some sort of major philanthropy within a year of inheriting. Second, you must begin to prepare for your debut in the Wizengamot and the International Confederation of Wizards. When you come of age this July, you will be expected to take your hereditary seats on both councils. Then there's the matter of hiring an executor to oversee and invest the estate – each Lord Black is expected to net at least 10 growth every year, and frankly, that's a task best left to professionals."

"What happens if I don't do these things?" asked Harry.

"Well, if you don't show at the Wizengamot and the ICW, the family will lose its hereditary seat. Trust me, this is not something you want to lose, especially for someone in your continually wavering political position. I suspect you will find membership on those councils very useful before this war is over and done with. As for the rest, I'm frankly unsure. There used to be a Board of Trustees that oversaw the estate and made sure the Head was doing his job, but there are so few Blacks left..." Tonks trailed off, seemingly lost in thought.

"I suppose philanthropy isn't such a bad idea," said Harry, "though I can't imagine why I would need to actively make the Black assets even larger than they are, that vault has enough cash for at least a hundred lifetimes."

"Don't be so sure," said Tonks seriously. "In the last war, there was severe hyperinflation for about a year and a half. The Galleon was worth virtually nothing and frankly, were it not for the Blacks' extensive holdings of Muggle cash and stock, the estate would have been entirely crippled. With the incredible wealth Voldemort controls it's entirely possible that he may be planning on causing another crisis as part of his endgame."

Harry did not understand just how Voldemort could cause a crisis, but decided to take Tonks at her word. "Alright," he said, "No trips to America just yet. But that doesn't change the fact that I need to give an interview or a statement of some kind, especially given Ron..." Harry trailed off and looked to Hermione who nodded solemnly and spoke.

"I don't think an exclusive is the way to go," she said. "If you're going for defiance and strength in the face of tragedy, then it would be better to have a full-on press conference. Invite reporters from all over the world and have the thing simulcast on WWN. If you let the people see you in public, it will strongly reinforce your message that they need not be afraid."

Harry agreed, and the trio set to work planning the event. Across the country in Wiltshire, Lord Voldemort was considering the attack on Ron Weasley. On the face of it, the attack was a good thing. As a member of a famously anti-Dark family and a close friend of Harry Potter's, he was a good symbol of opposition to Voldemort's power. The fact that the boy had been attacked in Diagon Alley would be sure to inspire fear among the public. The brutal nature of the attack, too, would serve that purpose.

Despite this, the Dark Lord was furious over the whole affair. No matter how good the fate of Ron Weasley had been for his war plans, it had occurred without his authorization. Voldemort believed his Death Eaters to be more disciplined than that. He sincerely hoped that this attack was a random act of violence, preferably by a foolish junior member seeking his favor. Deep down, however, he feared that the attack had been ordered by one of his Inner Circle. If this was the case, it meant only one thing...

Mutiny.

There had been two rebellions amongst the Death Eaters during Voldemort's first bid for power. The time and energy it had taken to put down the insurrections had caused him to miss valuable opportunities to seize control of the Ministry and set back his plans by years. That absolutely could not happen this time. He knew that someone competent would replace the buffoon Fudge within days. When that happened, Dumbledore's Order of the Phoenix, never more than a slight annoyance in the past, would be allowed to openly organize against him and potentially even gain a numbers advantage.

And then there was the problem of Potter. If his suspicions regarding the prophecy were true, the boy would soon emerge as a serious threat. Though Voldemort would never consider saying it aloud, he was beginning to become unnerved by the boy's continued survival. If the boy could succeed as he had at the Department of Mysteries with minimal combat skills, meek allies, and no planning, how dangerous would he be as a trained fighter? How much longer could he legitimately tell his Death Eaters that Potter posed no threat? The days when Harry could be regarded as an insignificant schoolboy were rapidly coming to an end.

Enough of this, thought Voldemort. He gazed around his palatial lodgings in the Malfoy manor. Wormtail was standing nervously roughly halfway between his master and the door. Nagini was curled up on the sofa, the tip of her tail twitching ever so slightly as she slept. He could hear Draco through the wall separating the bedroom next door. The hag Parkinson called a daughter was in there as well; the Malfoy heir was awkwardly trying to convince her to perform some degrading sex act the boy had read about in a magazine. Voldemort rolled his red, demon-like eyes and silently bemoaned his fate. In ten years' time, that boy is going to be one of my top commanders.

"Wormtail, come here," the Dark Lord hissed lazily. Pettigrew instantly sprung to attention and prostrated himself at Voldemort's feet.

"I have a few tasks for you, Wormtail," continued Voldemort, ignoring the man before him with all but his voice. "You will first tell that Malfoy brat to either keep it in his pants or relocate to a different room. Second, you will bring me a copy of The Daily Prophet. Third, you will give me your arm and we shall call the Death Eaters."

"Yes, my Lord," Wormtail said, and hastily scrambled out the door to do his master's bidding.

With a slight pop, Voldemort Apparated to the chamber he had created beneath the Malfoys' drawing room floor. It was a simple place; a round room made of stone with torches spaced evenly around the walls. At the far end of the room there was a raised circular platform upon which Voldemort's obsidian throne sat. Unbeknownst to his followers, the Dark Lord had placed rather strong warming and cushioning charms on the throne so that he would be comfortable during the sometimes interminable strategy sessions and reports. Evil he might be, but a masochist Voldemort was not.

Within three minutes, the chamber was filled with the cracks of Apparition. Assembled before Voldemort now were some thirty Death Eaters, the pitiful few that remained of his once-proud legions. I must step up recruitment, thought Voldemort as he gazed upon his trembling supporters. As soon as the thought came, he banished it. He could ponder such things later.

"I wonder," Voldemort began in his most malevolent hiss, "if any of you read The Daily Prophet this morning?" As the Dark Lord raised the paper, the Death Eaters remained silent, knowing their master did not seek an answer to his question.

"There was some very interesting news this morning," he continued, staring down each of his supporters in turn. Voldemort saw no tell-tale flinches, so he went on.

"In a gruesome attack sure to send shockwaves through the magical community, Ronald Weasley, 16, was found tortured to insanity behind a Knockturn Alley dumpster late last night, the Dark Mark floating over his body, Ministry officials say," the Dark Lord quoted, a mocking note in his hiss. "It seems that the youngest son of the Mudblood-loving Weasley clan has been disposed of."

Several of the Death Eaters began snickering at this, but stopped promptly when they saw their master was not joining in their mirth.

"Please," Voldmeort implored, "continue to express your joy. This truly is a great victory for us and our cause. In fact, whoever led this attack on Weasley, please come forward and receive your reward."

No one moved. The newer Death Eaters in the crowd did not dare attempt to take credit for something they had not done, lest they be contradicted. The older, more experienced Death Eaters realized the danger of the situation and braced themselves for pain.

"No takers?" asked Voldemort, a dangerous silkiness in his voice as he scanned the room again. "No one willing to take credit for their deed?" Again, Voldemort received no response.

"Bella," the Dark Lord said, turning his attention to one of the cloaked figures in the front row. "You like the Cruciatus curse. Were you involved?"

"No my Lord," cried Bellatrix Lestrange with a note of slavish devotion. "it was not I!"

"Are you sure," Voldemort asked. Bellatrix nodded fervently. "But it says right here you did it," he said, once again indicating The Daily Prophet. She shook her head vigorously, and the Dark Lord moved on.

"Take this, Narcissa," he said, throwing the newspaper to another robed figure. She caught it with ease. Voldemort whispered something and suddenly Narcissa's hands clenched on the paper. She could not let go if she tried.

"Now, it wasn't you who did it, was it Narcissa?" Voldemort asked. The congregation of Death Eaters watched on with bated breath, praying that their master worked out his anger on the Black sisters and left them alone.

"It was not I, my Lord!" Narcissa declared, but she was starting to sweat. She did not know why Voldemort had bound her hands to this paper, but she sensed that it was not good.

"Really," said Voldemort skeptically. "It was not you who led an unsanctioned attack and then had the audacity to shoot the Dark Mark above the scene?"

"No my Lord!" cried Narcissa in real panic, there was no denying that she was in for pain.

"Are you sure? Are you sure you weren't upset when that little blood-traitor inherited a million Galleons from your cousin while you were left nothing? Are you sure you didn't hang around Diagon Alley after the will reading, see him walking around with a pocket full of Galleons and...snap?" Voldemort put a special, malicious emphasis on the last word.

"No, my Lord!" Narcissa shouted. "I – "

"Do not lie to me, Narcissa! Incendio!"

Fire sprang from the end of Voldemort's wand and hit the newspaper in Narcissa's hands. It instantly caught and erupted in flames, and Narcissa screamed with pain as her once perfect, aristocratic hands

were consumed by the fire. Some of the Death Eaters coughed and gagged as the smoke and smell of burning flesh engulfed their lungs.

Voldemort took the opportunity to rip into Narcissa's mind, searching hungrily for confirmation of his suspicions. He found the memory he sought and watched as Narcissa led Draco out of Gringotts, scolding him for his outburst. The pair stopped in quickly at Eeylops Owl Emporium to pick up treats for their eagle owl and walked over to the Apparition point. As Voldemort watched them, he noticed something in his peripheral vision. He turned and saw it fully: Ron Weasley was walking toward The Leaky Cauldron, being subtly pushed along by Harry Potter. Voldemort studied his nemesis' face and nearly gasped; Potter's face was contorted by hatred unlike any the Dark Lord had ever seen the boy display. This was far beyond the schoolboy anger that sometimes arose between good friends, this was hot, terrible, seething malevolence – loathing in its purest form. Voldemort instantly understood what had happened to Ron Weasley.

Voldemort pulled out of Narcissa's mind and put out the fire, which had reduced the ends of her arms to bleeding stumps. He mindlessly barked an order at Lucius to clean her up and dismissed his followers. Returning to his obsidian throne, Voldemort leaned back, and his lipless mouth curved into a twisted sort of grin.

Oh, Harry. There may be hope for you yet...

A/N: Alright, there it is! I'm sorry this chapter was a little slow, but it lays the foundation for a lot of plot elements to follow. To make some amends for that, I am taking a page out of full pensieves' book and including footnotes to the chapter below. Once again, I thank all of you profusely for reading and reviewing RotA, the stats make me smile every time I look at them. Until next time...

i Slytherin's chapter titles make homage to Locke, Machiavelli, Tocqueville, Hobbes, and Aristotle, elements of whose philosophies will be seen as Slytherin's writings and this story unfolds.

ii A fun game you can play with this story is going back through all the dates and numbers I give and figuring out their relationships to the numbers 3 and 7, each should have several. (Example: In the number 1229, 1 2 3, 9-27, 1 2 2 9 14, 14/2 7, 4-13) A Google search on the numerology of these numbers may give you a hint as to the story's direction.

iii These nefarious sources of income become important

iv Except for Slytherin's role, the description of the origins of the Crusades is accurate

v As memory serves me, JKR states in canon that Slytherin and Gryffindor had "a fight" that resulted in Slytherin leaving the school.

vi Despite this, my second reference to an Auror taking N.E.W.T. History of Magic, it will not be among Harry's courses when he returns to school. Look for more info from N.E.W.T. History of Magic to pop up, however.

vii What other reasons have we seen for Slytherin-related objects being in the House of Black?

viii Harry's choice to read Slytherin's book is a key one.

ix A reference to the witches of Macbeth

x This is not the last you will hear of Wryvensgord

xi Read David Mayhew's Congress: The Electoral Connection, a famous essay on political science, for a more thorough discussion of why this would be.

xii I hardly think I should have to tell you there is a specific, unstated reason Dumbledore wishes Harry to stay away from goblins

Chapter Six: The Two Slytherins

With a slight whisper of a pop, a dark figure appeared in Diagon Alley. Black robes swishing around him, he made his way up the High Street toward a tall, box-like

building, its dull gray color contrasting vividly with the vibrant colors all around. As he approached, he noticed a small girl no older than thirteen leading her openly gaping parents around. The father spotted another child zooming on a broom around above Quality Quidditch Supplies and snapped a picture.

Filthy Muggles and their Mudblood spawn, the dark figure thought and raised his wand, a pinprick of sickly green light appearing at its end before he stopped himself. We can deal with them later, he thought.

No, Lord Voldemort had not come to Diagon Alley for his normal fare of destruction and murder. This trip was more of a social call, a quick check-in on one of his biggest living nemeses.

As Voldemort approached the gray building he spotted his quarry: Harry Potter. The Boy Who Lived was standing solemnly on an improvised platform, the Mudblood Granger and Bellatrix's pink-haired cousin flanking him. Before Harry was a gaggle of reporters, fighting with each other to set up their Quick Quotes Quills in the best positions. As Granger stepped forward, Voldemort strengthened the Notice-Me-Not charms on him and settled in the back row to watch.

"Hello, all," Hermione addressed the crowd in a rather nervous voice. "Thank you for coming out to the press conference. I am Hermione Jane Granger, the woman to the right is Auror Nymphadora Tonks, and obviously the man behind me is Lord Harry James Black-Potter, Viscount of Hampshire. Harry will read a brief statement regarding the attack on our friend Ron Weasley, which will be followed by a

brief question-and-answer session. Thank you."

Hermione stepped away from the podium and Harry replaced him, a nervous lump in his throat. Harry had never been particularly comfortable with public speaking, and now he had to tell a series of bald-faced lies to the press. He cleared his throat and went through some of the calming exercises Hermione had taught him. As he scanned the crowd before him, Harry felt a sharp pain in his scar when he reached the back row, but ignored it. It was always bad if Voldemort was happy about something, but there was nothing to be done about that now. Harry cleared his throat one last time and began to read.

"Good evening. I stand before you today filled with both grief and anger. Ron Weasley was the first friend I ever had, the first guy my age who wanted anything to do with me. He was a fiercely loyal friend, one who always had my back when others doubted me. Through Ron, I got to know the Weasley family, which has taken me in as one of their own. I am eternally grateful for Ron's friendship, and I mourn his loss.

"But even on a sad, sad evening such as this, we cannot afford to merely mourn. As this attack proves, Lord Voldemort and his followers are as dangerous and malevolent as ever. Though he is weakened by the recent arrest of 11 Death Eaters at the Ministry of Magic, we cannot afford to be complacent. We must cripple Voldemort while we can, before he regains lost strength and can once again wage full-scale war against our civilization. I look forward to taking my family's seat in the Wizengamot and fighting for more aggressive measures to demolish Voldemort's Death Eater support and marginalize the Dark Lord himself. I am now open to your questions." Harry looked up from the notes Hermione had prepared and faced the audience, once again receiving a sharp pain in his scar as he scanned the back row. He disregarded it as the reporters began shouting questions at him, their voices melding into an incomprehensible cacophony. Waving his arms frantically to shut

them up, Harry yelled, "Please, one at a time! Raise your hands and wait to be called on!"

Harry pointed to a woman in the front row first. "Marissa Fairchild, Daily Prophet," she introduced herself before continuing. "Harry, there are persistent rumors that the 11 Death Eaters captured at the Ministry broke into the Department of Mysteries with the intention of stealing a prophecy concerning yourself and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Can you confirm or deny these rumors? Do you know the contents of the prophecy?"

Harry smiled; Hermione had predicted this question. "What would you like me to tell you, Marissa? That the rumors are true? That I heard the prophecy, remembered it exactly, and could recite it for you right now? What would you like the prophecy to say? That I alone can defeat Voldemort? That I will defeat Voldemort?" Harry smirked, and let his rhetorical question hang in the air, tantalizing the reporters. After the pause, he gave a short cough of a laugh and continued, "No, unfortunately I can't tell you any of that. We were indeed in the Department of Mysteries and the Death Eaters were seeking a specific prophecy. I can't tell you any more than that, though. The prophecy broke during the fight, no one heard what it said. Next question?"

While he scanned the crowd again, deciding which reporter to call on, Harry thought about when he would actually tell Hermione about the prophecy. It was knowledge she needed to have at some point, if only so that Harry didn't have to deal with it alone. He wasn't worried about moral questions of killing Voldemort, not now that he'd killed Uncle Vernon. The problem was "the power the Dark Lord knows not." Harry knew he'd need Hermione to find it, whatever it was, and there was no chance of him getting her help without telling her the prophecy. The only question was how Hermione would react. Uncharacteristically, she hadn't yet spoken to Harry about his killing of Uncle Vernon nor his use of the Cruciatus on Kingsley – though the second was more understandable, they had been working

nonstop since that incident. As a result of this, Harry could not be sure of Hermione's attitude toward killing. She said upon arriving at Grimmauld Place that they must "fight fire with fire," but was that just talk?

Shaking off these thoughts, Harry indicated another witch, who identified herself as Crystal Peters before asking her question. "What possessed you to kill Vernon Dursley, Harry? How did you manage to work Avada Kedavra? Had you used an Unforgiveable Curse before?"

"If you read the trial transcripts, you can see perfectly clearly what 'possessed' me to kill my Uncle," Harry replied coldly. "I got Avada Kedavra to work by drawing upon all the anger and pain he caused me, and if I'd used Unforgivables before, don't you think you'd have heard about it?"

Harry answered a few more questions about Ron and other events of the past few weeks on autopilot before one threw him off his guard. "How do you respond to reports of a growing rift between yourself and Albus Dumbledore?"

"I'm sorry?"

"A rift between yourself and Albus Dumbledore. The two of you were seen briefly bickering in Diagon Alley the afternoon you were acquitted, and there are rumors that you destroyed a significant portion of his office prior to the end of term this year. What are the two of you fighting over?"

Harry looked more intently at the reporter and finally recognized her as Rita Skeeter. As he looked back to Hermione for help, he recalled the beetle he had brushed off his arm before Tonks Apparated them to Grimmauld Place. So that was Rita, he thought. I thought Hermione had put a stop to her buzzing around.

"Professor Dumbledore and I have had a couple disagreements of late," Harry said, keeping his tone casual and his diction euphemistic. "One or two issues have arisen upon which we have differing views, and which we will sort out internally. I can assure you, however, that our main point of contention – my summer living arrangements – has been settled, and I bear no particular ill will toward the Headmaster. I will be voting to reinstate him as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot and Supreme Mugwump of the ICW when I take my seats there."

Harry valiantly beat back follow-up questions from the reporters for the next five minutes before Tonks stepped forward and declared the press conference over. The crowd disbursed, many among the crowd heading back into the gray building; it was The Daily Prophet's headquarters. As the crowd scattered, Harry, Hermione and Tonks stepped down from the stage and silently made their way back to the Apparition point.

Voldemort saw the direction Potter was walking and quickened his pace to catch up. As he drew nearer, the Dark Lord removed his Notice-Me-Not charm before quickly becoming invisible. Soon, the he was striding not a pace behind the boy and he spoke softly in Parseltongue,

"Nice performance, Harry, it should have fooled them. But you and I both know who really tortured Ron Weasley...impressive work indeed. I'll be in touch..."

With that, Voldemort Conjured a small basilisk replica and slipped it into Harry's pocket before Disapparating away from the suddenly petrified boy.

As Harry heard Voldemort's Parseltongue hissing in his ears, he stopped dead in his tracks, his face drained of blood. He trembled, rooted to the spot, not daring to believe what had just happened. Had Voldemort just communicated through his scar?

Then Harry felt the small snake drop into his pocket and heard the tiny pop of Voldemort's Disapparition and became truly scared. How long had Voldemort been there? Harry thought back to the occasional scar pains he got during the conference; had Voldemort been there, too? Harry was suddenly very thankful that he had not revealed the prophecy as he had been tempted to – Voldemort could have cast Avada Kedavra and ended the war instantly.

Tonks, who wasn't paying attention, ran headlong into the frozen Harry to break him out of his reverie. Harry let loose an oomph of surprise as the clumsy Auror crashed into his back and looked around wildly, drawing his wand with a curse on his lips. Hermione stopped and looked at him with concern,

"What's wrong, Harry?"

He shook her off, eyes still wide with fear. He turned around to Tonks, who had been knocked over by her impact with Harry.

"Take us home, Tonks." Though his voice shook, Tonks recognized the authority in his words. Dusting herself off, Tonks grabbed Harry and Hermione by the arms and with a loud crack, the trio disappeared.

When the three returned to Grimmauld Place, Harry told the girls about Voldemort's visit. Both of them were horrified, although Hermione appeared to temper her response for Harry's sake. Tonks, on the other hand, began hyperventilating and refused to calm down. Eventually, Hermione cast the Somnus charm on the Auror, causing her to doze off. After levitating Tonks upstairs into her bed, Harry and Hermione returned to the kitchen. Harry poured each of them a cup of tea while Hermione settled herself at the rough wood table. Harry handed Hermione her mug and sat down to her left. Hermione smiled at him as she took her first sip of Earl Grey and Harry found himself grinning back. It felt nice to be doing something normal for once; a bit of peace in the most hectic summer of his life. Sitting here with

Hermione, Harry could almost pretend they were in the Great Hall, relaxing before an evening of Quidditch practice or studying.

"So, how are you doing?" Harry asked.

"I'm a little overwhelmed, frankly," said Hermione, her smile fading a little to reflect her fatigue. "It's been a long day."

"That it has," Harry agreed, checking the clock on the wall. It was only 9:00. He turned back to Hermione and searched her face for a clue about her response to her next question. "How – how are you doing...you know, about Ron?"

Hermione sobered entirely and contemplated her answer. "I – I – I'm not entirely sure," she eventually stuttered. "I mean, he was, well – you know, Ron. He was our best friend. So obviously I'm very sad, but..." She trailed off, glancing nervously up at Harry and biting her lip.

"Please don't take this the wrong way, Harry," she pleaded, "but some of the things he said about me...and you...they border on unforgivable, Harry. I wouldn't have wished this on him, but..." Hermione trailed off uncertainly again.

"I know how you feel," Harry said, reaching out and laying a hand on her shoulder. "I, ah, heard some of your argument yesterday. You both looked to be in a right state."

"Yes, it was quite heated between us for a time..." Hermione trailed off, a sudden look of alarm crossing her face. "Harry, where were you yesterday? I don't think I saw you at all after the will reading!"

Harry panicked, he had not anticipated this question at all. "Well, I was wearing a Disillusionment Charm," he joked feebly, his mind racing for some plausible story.

"Harry James Potter don't you dare try to put me off like that!"

"Relax Hermione, it was just a joke." Harry attempted an ingratiating smile as he finally alighted on the solution. "I had to stay behind to do some business with the goblins. There are so many little details that have to be attended when you're moving an estate of that size, I was there all day. What did you do yesterday?"

Hermione looked a little suspicious of this explanation, but dropped the issue. She explained that she and Tonks had indulged themselves with a little shopping spree that started in the more posh areas of Diagon Alley and eventually spilled over into Muggle Knightsbridge. After this trip, which Harry gathered had taken several hours, they went for dinner at a French restaurant Hermione's parents had gone to on their 15th anniversary. Thoroughly sated from dinner and exhausted from their day of shopping, Tonks Apparated the two back to Grimmauld Place, where they went to bed rather instantly.

"I'm sorry for leaving you behind, Harry, we weren't really thinking. It's easy to forget about someone when they're Disillusioned," Hermione finished.

"It's ok, Hermione. Like I said, I was stuck with the goblins all day," Harry reassured her. "I'm glad you two had fun." I know I did, Harry's mind finished for him, recalling the euphoria the curse gave him. Perhaps that was why he had held it so long.

A comfortable silence fell between the two of them. Grabbing his tea and bidding Hermione to follow him, Harry ascended the stairs and entered the drawing room. After lazily casting Incendio at the fireplace, Harry sat on the couch and placed his mug on the coffee table. He indicated the cushion next to him with his hand and Hermione joined him, curling up at his side and resting her head on his knee. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, deciding that this was the most natural place for it to rest.

Neither of them said anything. Harry stared into the flickering orange and yellow flames, relishing the moment. It wasn't often that he and Hermione got to just relax like this; at Hogwarts, they were always so busy with homework or Quidditch or the D.A. or that year's mystery that they never got to lay back and unwind. There needs to be more of this, Harry thought. Sitting there with Hermione, Harry didn't have to worry about Voldemort and the Death Eaters, or Ron, or the prophecy, or anything else. For once, he was able to shed the stresses that came with being Harry Potter the marked celebrity, and enjoy being Harry Potter the normal teenager.

Hermione shifted underneath Harry, causing him to momentarily tighten his grip on her. When he was satisfied she wasn't falling off the couch, Harry started to relax his hold until Hermione touched his hand with her own. She turned her neck to look up at him, her chestnut eyes boring into his. "Please, Harry. It's just the two of us now."

Harry nodded and held his lone best friend close. They continued to sit in silence, for how long, Harry did not know. Every so often, one of them would take a sip of tea, make a small adjustment in their position or make a vague noise of contentment, but they did not speak. Eventually, when the once-proud fire had been reduced to embers, Hermione gently removed herself from Harry's grasp and sat up.

"We should go to bed."

Harry merely nodded and followed her up from the couch, ignoring the mugs of cold tea on the coffee table. Kreacher would clean those up later. The two climbed the stairs together in silence. When they reached the landing before Hermione's room, the Muggle-born witch hugged Harry and kissed him briefly on the cheek.

"Thank you," was all she said before turning and retreating to her

room. Harry continued up to the Master bedroom, changed into his pajamas, and was soon fast asleep.

The next several weeks passed with little incident. The day after the press conference, the three residents of Grimmauld Place went to the Burrow to console the Weasley family. Seeing Molly's anguish over the fate of her son gave Harry his first real twinge of guilt. Arthur stoked Harry's guilt when he pulled him aside and told him not to blame himself for the attack. That night, Harry buried himself in the library and refused to speak with Tonks or Hermione. The girls chalked it up to grief and let him be.

True to their word, Moody and Kingsley had been coming to Grimmauld Place twice a week to teach Harry and Hermione – and, to a lesser extent, Tonks – the art of combat. After the excitement of the first lesson, things settled into a more traditional teaching atmosphere. Hermione, though lacking Harry's raw power, proved more adept than he at countering and launching more creative attacks. Indeed, there were several duels in which Hermione did not use a single curse, relying entirely on trickery and subtle charms to incapacitate her opponent. This was not to say Hermione could not use curses or had some sort of objection to them, she was simply bored by them. This point was best illustrated by one duel that Hermione ended with a vicious curse that collapsed Moody's ribcage. While Kingsley rushed to heal the ex-Auror, Hermione turned to Harry and said, "See, I could do that every time, but where's the challenge?"

Aside from the combat lessons, Harry was spending a good amount of time reading Slytherin's manuscript. The second section, "Discourses of the Natural Superiority of Pureblood Wizards," was largely a load of waffle, in Harry's opinion. Slytherin made occasional valid points, such as his illustration of how special magical traits like Parseltongue could only occur in purebloods, but on the whole, his arguments seemed shallow. Slytherin assumed that purebloods must by definition have stronger magic than Muggle-borns or Half-bloods,

but he failed to address how to deal with a Half-blood or Muggle-born who was as strong or stronger than purebloods. What would Slytherin say, Harry wondered, if someone showed him Hermione, Tonks, or even Tom Riddle? The only really interesting thing in this chapter was when Harry had spotted his own family mentioned. Slytherin had cited the Potter family in his section on heritable magical traits; apparently the Potters had been rather famous for their Warding abilities. Again, Harry had to question the veracity of Slytherin's argument – it seemed quite possible that his ancestors had happened upon an effective warding spell and merely kept it to themselves.

Harry was settling down to begin reading the Slytherin's third section when a sudden tapping on the window nearest his seat in the library distracted him. Harry stood to open the window and an unfamiliar Masked Owl flew in and alighted upon the table beside Harry's chair. Harry relieved the owl of its letter and read,

Dear Harry,

I hope this letter finds you well. It has been several weeks since I left my message with the goblins but yet I have not received confirmation that you received it or that you will indeed be meeting with me tomorrow. I know that we have not gotten to know each other well, if at all, in our years at Hogwarts, but I promise you that I hold none of the ill feelings toward you that so many of my housemates have. The issues I have to discuss with you are far more important than the trivial rivalries between our houses. Please write back soon to confirm that you will meet with me tomorrow after you meet with the goblins.

Sincerely,

Blaise Zabini

Harry had indeed forgotten about Blaise's message; the events of the

past few weeks and his focus on lessons with Moody and Shacklebolt had driven it clear from his mind. He wondered vaguely what the pretty Slytherin girl might want. He recalled her initial note from the day of Sirius' will reading. She had said then that the issues she wished to discussed were too sensitive to be addressed in a letter, and that she would need to show him physical evidence in order for him to believe it. What could that mean?

Harry was disturbed from his thoughts by the arrival of Hermione, who was carrying a lunch tray. Because none of them trusted Kreacher, Tonks and Hermione had taken to doing all the cooking in Grimmauld Place. As it turned out, Hermione had been so enamored by the local cuisine during her French vacation three summers previously that she had forced her parents to hire a chef to tutor her during the holidays. In the intervening years she had become quite a gourmet. Since moving into Grimmauld Place she spent much of her free time teaching Tonks the skills she had picked up. Today, however, lunch was a simple affair – grilled ham and cheese sandwiches with tomato soup on the side.

Hermione set the tray down on the end table by Harry's chair and joined him at the window. "What's that," she asked, indicating Blaise's letter.

Harry looked at Hermione and ran his fingers through his hair. "Do you remember seeing Blaise Zabini at Sirius' will reading," he asked.

"Yes, now that you mention it. I was kind of confused, but I figured she was just dating Malfoy or something and got dragged along."

"No, apparently she was there because she wanted to talk to me about something," said Harry, repressing a shudder at the idea of anyone dating Malfoy. "After the reading was over, she passed a note to me through the goblins asking if I would meet with her in Diagon Alley on my birthday. This here is a letter from her asking me to confirm that I'll meet with her."

Harry handed the letter to Hermione, who read it quickly. When she finished, he asked, "Do you have any idea what this could be about, Hermione? What do you know about her?"

Hermione frowned and furrowed her brow slightly. "Not much, really. She's pretty smart, I think she's only behind Padma and myself in our year. I know she doesn't run around with Malfoy and the junior Death Eaters very much if at all. Beyond that though..." Hermione trailed off and gave a small snort of laughter. "I remember Lavender and Parvati gossiping about her getting caught in a broom closet with some Ravenclaw boy last year. And that's really all I know."

"Hmmm," said Harry, who thought he might be a tad envious of the anonymous Ravenclaw. "Well, Grabtooth reckons I should meet with her, what do you think?"

"I doubt there could be much harm in meeting with her," said Hermione thoughtfully. "She doesn't seem like the type to be in league with the Death Eaters and try to ambush you or anything. So long as Tonks and myself are with you and we all stay on our guard, you should be safe. Meet with her before the your parents' will reading, though, I imagine you'll have to go through all the paperwork and stuff again and who knows when you'll be out of there."

"Good idea," agreed Harry. He returned to his chair and produced a piece of parchment and a quill to write a reply to Blaise.

The following morning, Harry awoke with a degree of trepidation. Even though it was his 16th birthday Harry couldn't shake the feeling that there would be precious little time for celebrating. First, there was this mysterious meeting with Blaise that simply confused Harry more and more every time he thought about it. At noon, he'd have to go Gringotts and officially inherit his parents' estate. Harry still could not believe that he'd learned about this from goblins rather than from one of the many adults in his life who had known Lily and James.

How had he never been told that his old vault and just been a trust? How had no one ever tried to prepare him for the political duties that would come when he took the Potters' seat in the Wizengamot? Harry knew nothing of the political issues or current events that concerned Wizarding government, yet now he was expected to help make laws?

Despite these slightly dark thoughts, Harry was mostly optimistic about this day. For the first time in his life, he would be celebrating his birthday with people he knew and cared about. Really, this would be the first time he celebrated his birthday period. Rather than spending the day in his bedroom waiting for the cards of his friends and hoping the Dursleys would see fit to leave him alone, Harry would be going out tonight. Tonks had made reservations for the three at one of Diagon Alley's finest restaurants and Hermione had expressed a desire to go to a club afterwards. Since Sirius' will reading, Hermione had completely come out of her shell. Harry supposed that she had always been assertive, particularly when she believed Harry or Ron to be in the wrong, but over the past month she seemed more alive than she ever had. Harry could see a sort of real joy shining through her these days, one he had rarely seen in the girl. He'd mentioned this observation to her once after she had come out of a practice duel with Kingsley looking particularly enraptured, but Hermione had dismissed it as a figment of Harry's imagination. Despite her denial, Harry was happy for Hermione. He had worried for her before, fearing that sooner or later, she would become disillusioned by a life devoted entirely to books and trivial learning. Harry believed that was the reason behind Hermione's sometimes domineering personality; that on some subconscious level, she realized and was frustrated by the fact that being the first to raise her hand in every class and knowing every minute detail of historical figures' lives was ultimately pointless. Since moving into Grimmauld Place, however, the domineering Hermione of the past was gone, replaced by a much more affable and relaxed girl that Harry was happy to spend most of the day with.

Harry joined Hermione and Tonks in the entrance hall to prepare to leave for Diagon Alley. As he descended the stairs, the girls looked up and smiled.

"Happy Birthday, Harry!" said Tonks, meeting him on the bottom step and giving Harry a hug.

Harry returned the smile and climbed down the last step. Hermione came up and hugged him as well. "Happy Birthday, Harry," she said. "You want your presents now or at dinner?"

"At dinner ought to be fine," grinned Harry, who was legitimately thrilled to be opening his friends' gifts in person rather than after receiving them by owl. "Shall we head off to meet Blaise then?"

Harry and Hermione grabbed Tonks' arms and with a small pop, the trio Apparated to front entrance of the Leaky Cauldron. Once they went inside, it was just a matter of seconds before they spotted Blaise. The blonde Slytherin girl was sitting in between a pair of goblins at the bar and consulting a menu. She was wearing a rather form-fitting set of light blue robes that seemed to softly twinkle when she moved; Harry was faintly reminded of his former Professor Lockhart. Harry gave a slight start when he recognized the goblin on Blaise's right as Grabtooth. He began to wonder if Blaise knew who Grabtooth was, but had his question answered when Blaise set down her menu and whispered something in the goblin's ear. This was shaping up to be a very odd meeting indeed.

Harry walked up to the bar, Tonks and Hermione trailing behind him, and made himself known. "Hi Blaise," he said, making every effort to conceal his confusion. "How are you?"

Blaise twisted around in her seat to see him and smiled. "Harry," she opened warmly, "Thank you so much for agreeing to see me."

"S no problem," Harry said. He made a gesture to indicate the girls

behind him, who had just arrived at the bar. "Have you met Hermione and Tonks?"

"My pleasure," said Blaise, shaking the hand of each girl. "And you know Grabtooth and his assistant Stillstone?"

"Its been a little while," Harry said to Grabtooth, still doing his best to mask his confusion at the presence of the goblins.

"I must say," said Hermione, who was eyeing Stillstone warily, "you've been awfully mysterious as to what this whole thing is about, Blaise. All of us are at a loss as to what this might be about."

"Well then, let's not tarry, yeah?" said Blaise. She summoned Tom, the barkeep. "Is our private room ready yet, Tom?"

"Aye, so it is madam," Tom said, flashing the Slytherin a toothless grin.

"Excellent. Would you take us up there and then send up my order?" Blaise turned to Harry. "Would you guys like to order anything?"

Harry ordered a plate of kippers and sausage with scrambled eggs and then followed Blaise and Tom up the stairs to room number 14, a large conference room with a wide central table flanked by a small army of comfortable chairs. Harry chose a seat at the head of the table and the others filled in the seats around the corners, with Hermione and Tonks sitting to his left and Blaise and the goblins sitting to his right. Blaise whispered something to Grabtooth, who then made a motion at Stillstone. The assistant goblin got up and strode toward the door, waving his right hand and chanting under his breath as he did so. "Privacy charms," Blaise explained to Hermione, who was sporting a curious look.

"So what's all this about," asked Harry once the goblin had finished his work. "Why am I here?"

"I'll try to be as direct as possible, Harry," said Blaise. She adjusted herself in her seat before continuing.

"Last month, you and several of your friends were involved in a battle in the Department of Mysteries. The battle was primarily over the possession of one of the prophecies stored in the Hall of Prophecy, correct?"

Tonks snorted derisively. "So you've read the newspaper, then?"

Harry shot the Auror a look, then said, "Yes, but the prophecy was destroyed during the battle. No one knows for sure what it said or even who it was about. Where are you going with this?"

"The prophecy was spoken to Albus Dumbledore by Sibyll Trelawney the summer before your birth. She delivered it in a private room at the Hog's Head bar in Hogsmeade at the end of her interview to become Hogwarts' Divination professor," continued Blaise.

Harry's jaw dropped. "How could you know that" he demanded, rising violently from his chair and towering over the Slytherin girl.

Blaise did not flinch. "I know a great deal more than that. I know the exact wording of the prophecy."

Harry gasped. "THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE!" he cried. "There are only two people in the world that know the full text of the prophecy, myself and Professor Dumbledore! Even Hermione doesn't know!"

Blaise took let out a low breath and stared calmly, but directly into Harry's eyes.

"Actually, Harry, you don't know the real prophecy either."

A/N: So yeah, if you can't tell, this chapter and the next are pretty big

turning points in the story. We're getting to the fun part, boys and girls.

Big props go out to omh666. Last week, the chapter you've just finished was about 3/4 completed but I hadn't worked on it in months and really had no plans of finishing it. omh submitted 3 reviews last week, though, and that's what inspired me to get back on the RotA horse. I've spent a great deal of my free time the past week combing through the old chapters, searching for old posts I had made on the Dark Lord Potter forums, and wracking my brain to figure out where I had been planning on taking RotA. I've tweaked my plan for this story from what I had originally intended, but I feel that we are on an excellent track, and I'm excited to continue writing this thing.

So, if anyone wasn't sure that writing reviews is a worthwhile use of your time, let RotA be all the proof you need. To be sure, I derive some pleasure from the simple act of writing this story, but the real reward of writing fan fiction comes from getting feedback from those who read it. It makes me feel wonderful to know that there are people out there reading my work; an email notifying me that someone has left a review brightens my day like nothing else. So please, **LEAVE REVIEWS!**

Some notes on this chapter:

-You may have noticed from this chapter and the previous one that my Voldemort is much more like a normal human being than he is in most characterizations (especially JKR's). This is intentional.

-Many of you may wonder if the Harry/Hermione scenes in this chapter indicate that this is going to become a H/Hr ship fic. I would like to reassure everyone that I remain committed to this being a H/Many fic. However, Hermione will take a very large role over the course of this story, so if you have some burning distaste for her and can't look past it, you should probably read something else.

-Stillstone's name is an homage to Donna Moss, the assistant to Josh Lyman on the TV show The West Wing. In case you are not aware, The West Wing is the greatest television show ever made. Period. Look out for more references.

If you've got any questions or comments or anything, please please please leave a review!!! Or send me a PM or something, but leave a review too!

Chapter Seven: The Real Prophecy

Previously on Harry Potter and the Rise of the Amphiptere:

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"Actually, Harry, you don't know the real prophecy either."

Harry goggled at Blaise. His brain was desperately telling his body to do something, anything, but the message was not getting through. Instead, he stood there, slack-jawed, gaping at the blonde Slytherin before him with a level of incredulity normally reserved for mountain trolls and drunken Hufflepuffs. The sheer absurdity of what Blaise was suggesting had simply overwhelmed him.

"How could that possibly be?" Harry finally managed, dropping back into his seat. "Dumbledore showed me his memory of the prophecy in his penseive!"

Blaise and Grabtooth shared a brief, knowing glance. "Penseive memories can be tampered with, Harry," Blaise explained gently. "This is why they aren't admissible as evidence in court; even someone only moderately skilled in the Mind Arts could successfully alter a memory enough to affect a trial outcome. Obviously, Dumbledore is well beyond 'moderately skilled' in the Mind Arts and there is no way he would let you know the true contents of the prophecy."

"How can you know that?" asked Harry, for what seemed like the millionth time. "As is, Dumbledore didn't want to tell me about the prophecy at all! I didn't even know there was a prophecy until Malfoy mentioned it!" Harry drew breath and opened his mouth to continue but was cut off by Hermione.

"Now wait just one minute!" A righteous fire Harry was unaccustomed to seeing outside of life-threatening battles and rants about house-elf rights lit the Gryffindor witch's eyes. She stared at Harry with an unreadable expression (was it betrayal? Harry asked himself furiously) in her eyes. "What is this prophecy that Dumbledore told you?" And why haven't you told me about it yet? her eyes seemed to ask. Harry fought down a pang of guilt.

"I'm really not supposed to say..." Harry began, but he trailed off and changed course at the looks on Hermione and Blaise's faces. "Fine. In essence, it says that in the end, I will kill Voldemort or Voldemort will kill me. Whichever of us survives will have won the war."

When Harry had thought about it before, he always envisioned that his revelation of the prophecy would be a dramatic affair. He would gravely summon his closest and most trusted friends into his room, or the Library in Grimmauld Place perhaps, and reveal the prophecy as a shattering truth. There would be an awkward, deafening silence. Then, Hermione would cry and refuse to believe it, spouting off with tear-stained rants about how Divination was wooly nonsense. Tonks would pretend to be strong and comforting, but would be wrecked by inner turmoil. Ron, if he had made it, would have been outwardly stout and defiant, pledging undying loyalty to Harry's cause while secretly adding the prophecy to his list of resentments against The Boy Who Lived. It would strain his relationship with everyone he told for days if not weeks or months, and even when things finally returned to "normal" the reality of the prophecy would pervade every interaction between those in the know; a chronic hippogriff in the room.

Things did not go as Harry had planned. Before Hermione and Tonks had a chance to react, Grabtooth let out a derisive snort. "Typical Dumbledore," he chuckled, shaking his head with a sort of exasperated amusement, just as a mother might after a toddler drew on the walls with crayon. At the confused looks on Harry's face, Grabtooth elaborated.

"Forgive me, Lord Black-Potter, but that is more or less exactly what I would have predicted Dumbledore would come up with as a false prophecy if he ever saw the need to feed you one. You see, Dumbledore is a master of 'revealing' things that people already know. Surely you didn't think the war could end any way other than one of the two of you killing the other? Does any other outcome even make sense?"

Harry thought about this for a moment. "Well, I never really thought that if Voldemort managed to kill me the war would be over," he began slowly. "But you're right, one way or another, it was always going to be me or him, in the end."

"You're almost right, Harry," said Blaise, smiling. "In the end, it will only be you. The real prophecy tells us that in the end, you will kill Voldemort and emerge victorious."

Harry stared at Blaise, confused and suspicious. "I don't get it. Why would Dumbledore keep something like that from me? Why would he invent a different prophecy? Isn't this wonderful news?"

Blaise and Crabbe shared a look. "Not necessarily," said Blaise quietly, looking away from Harry and falling silent.

Lord Voldemort was not known to be a particularly patient man. In the early days of his rise to power, The Daily Prophet was infamous for spelling his name incorrectly – they had somehow gotten the idea that it was spelled with an "i" in place of the "e." The seventh time this happened, Voldemort had paid a visit to the copy editor's house. After murdering the man's wife and child, the Dark Lord had eviscerated the editor and used his intestines to write the phrase "Can you spell it now?" After the man had been discovered, the Prophet took to calling Voldemort "You Know Who," fearing that any typo would spark another massacre.

It was surprising, then, that the Dark Lord had not yet cursed several poor Muggles into oblivion to vent his frustration over the lack of movement in his plans to liberate his servants incarcerated in Azkaban. The scheme had been mired by setback after setback. First he had had to recover from the magical strain that had come after his defeat in the Department of Mysteries. Though he was fully capable of doing the same advanced magic that any skilled wizard could, he was unable to perform the truly special bits of magic that

separated him from all wizards save Albus Dumbledore – his diminished ability to transport a legion of giants to Azkaban island so that they might lay siege to the prison walls being most troublesome in this instance. Then, when he finally did regain his strength, the Gurg of giants had backed out of their arrangement, citing the strange disappearance of a small giant named Grawp, an event that had greatly disturbed the Gurg for reasons that were frankly beyond Voldemort's understanding. He'd kill the Gurg later, but for now he'd have to come up with a different plan. Voldemort had given Wormtail the task of coming up with an alternate plan, but he held little hope that the rat would come up with anything. There was a reason he hadn't broken the prison during the last war, and it wasn't solely about the Dementors. Azkaban was a fortress in the truest sense of the word, protected by wards that had stood for centuries. Voldemort wasn't even entirely sure of where the prison was; he'd have to fly over the North Sea and scan for unusual concentrations of magic just to find the place.

In short, Voldemort needed a distraction. He needed something, anything to distract him. The defeat at the Ministry had robbed him of all his brightest lieutenants; Voldemort needed something to distract him from the crushing reality that at this moment, he was impotent. Useless. Powerless. Voldemort bitterly recalled the words Rudolph Krieger had said to him as a young man, before he had formed his legions of Death Eaters, "Kennen sie was ein Anfueher mit keinen Anhaengerin sind? Nichts als ein mench fuer wandern gehen." Do you know what a leader without any followers is? Nothing but a guy going for a walk.

Voldemort seethed. He needed someone smart, someone powerful, someone upon whom he could count. He needed...

"WORMTAIL!" the Dark Lord bellowed, and the sniveling rat-man was almost instantly at his side.

"Yes, m'lord," Wormtail stuttered, appearing to injure himself in his

haste to kiss the hem of Voldemort's robes.

"Summon Draco and Severus. I need a meeting with the three of you."

"Yes, of course my Master," said Wormtail and he fled the room. No more than five minutes later, Wormtail had come back with the others and the group was kneeling at the foot of Voldemort's throne.

"I wish to step up recruitment efforts on one particular individual, and the three of you know him better than any other of my Death Eaters. You should be honored to be on this committee."

"We are, Master," Snape spoke for the group, but Voldemort did not need his Legilimency skills to know they were confused.

The Dark Lord rose from his throne and walked over to the stairs that led back to the main of Malfoy Manor, hissing at Nagini to follow him as he did so. He paused on the third stair and turned to look back at his Death Eaters, who were still kneeling.

"The three of you will come up with a plan to successfully recruit Harry Potter into our ranks. You have a week."

And with that, Lord Voldemort vanished.

"I don't understand how it could be bad," said Tonks, piping up for the first time that morning. "If Harry is destined to defeat Voldemort and his victory is assured, we should have a parade or something!"

Hermione's eyes grew wide and she let out a gasp of realization. "It's not as simple as that, is it? There's another part to this prophecy, isn't there? Something terrible."

Blaise gave a grim nod and Hermione clasped her right hand to her mouth in horror, but Grabtooth preempted her speech, making a

quelling motion with his hands.

"It would be better if we had this discussion after Lord Black-Potter has heard the real prophecy," he said. Grabtooth turned to Stillstone, who nodded and produced a small, ornate chest. It was made of gold, with small rubies and emeralds placed in diamond patterns all over its sides and top. Just above the seam where it opened, a thin scroll made of pearl circumscribed the chest, a message in onyx Gobbledegook letters upon it. Stillstone placed the priceless artifact before Harry on the table and opened it, revealing a small glass orb filled with swirling smoke.

"The prophecy broke during the battle at the Department of Mysteries," said Harry, a note of suspicion growing in his voice.

"Pardon me Lord Black-Potter, but that is not correct," said Grabtooth. "The Ministry's copy of the prophecy broke during the battle at the Department of Mysteries. This is our copy."

Harry quirked his eyebrow skeptically. "Your copy," he said, unimpressed. "You just happen to have my prophecy lying around somewhere?"

He fixed Grabtooth with a challenging glare, but it was Tonks who spoke up. "Harry, prophecies are sacred to the goblins. They employ the same magic to detect prophecies as the Ministry because they see them as being key to all major decisions. If there's anything other than a legitimate prophecy in that chest, Grabtooth could be found guilty of heresy and beheaded."

Grabtooth and Stillstone nodded their agreement. The senior goblin spoke, "The Metamorphmagus is correct, of course. I would sooner attempt to assassinate Minister Fudge than I would put a false prophecy in one of these boxes."

Harry grinned. "Wouldn't we all," he joked and Hermione and Tonks

giggled softly. "Alright then," he continued, "I suppose I've got to accept that this is a real copy of the prophecy. How do I go about listening to it then?"

Stillstone gently lifted the glass orb out of its elaborate container and placed it on the table before Grabtooth, who placed his right hand on it and murmured a short phrase in Gobbledegook. The white smoke inside the ball suddenly stopped swirling and slowly rose through the walls of the orb, where it began undulating. Eventually, it took the form of a thin, crouched, ethereal-looking woman with overly large glasses and countless charms hanging around her neck – Harry quickly realized that this was a younger version of Professor Trelawney.

Moments after she finished materializing, Professor Trelawney's eyes rolled back in her head and the specter began to speak in the harsh, raspy, deep voice that Harry knew all too well.

Only a few hours had passed since Voldemort had assigned Wormtail, Draco, and Snape with the seemingly impossible task of recruiting Harry Potter into the Death Eater ranks. Nonetheless, it was with a certain confidence that the motley trio returned to their master, a plan already formulated. Snape had thought the other two were being too hasty in giving this presentation so quickly, reasoning that the Dark Lord must have thought the assignment to be remarkably difficult if he was giving them a week to come up with a plan. Draco and Wormtail had overruled him however, arguing that the ability to think and plan quickly was a sign of competence and that Voldemort would reward them for not forcing him to wait.

When the three reached the entrance to Voldemort's large suite in Malfoy Manor, Draco sent for a house-elf to announce their presence to the Dark Lord. Within a minute, the tiny creature reappeared, opening the door and bidding the trio to enter.

Voldemort was sitting in a throne before a fireplace in the living room

of his suite. Like the throne in the chamber beneath the drawing room, this one was made of the darkest obsidian and was outfitted with top-notch warming and cushioning charms. Unlike the other throne, however, this one was more ornate: the ends of the armrests had been carved to resemble the claws of a dragon and the Dark Mark had been carved beautifully in the space above Voldemort's head. The sides of this throne also concealed a secret compartment that opened and disappeared with a mere thought; currently, the compartment held a portable Wizarding Wireless receiver Voldemort had been using to listen to the Tutshill Tornadoes vs. Holyhead Harpies match before being interrupted by the house-elf.

The Dark Lord narrowed his snake-like eyes at his three Death Eaters as they came into the room. The speed of their return combined with the particularly arrogant gait with which the Malfoy scion walked told Voldemort everything he needed to know: this was bound to be a hastily conceived yet foolishly elaborate plan doomed to failure from the start. The only question in Voldemort's mind was how long he would have to suffer through the boy's prattle before he could curse him.

He barely allowed the Death Eaters to kneel and kiss the hem of his robes before he spoke, desperate for this meeting to conclude quickly so that he could return to the game. "What is it," he spat.

"My Lord, we have done as you asked and come up with a plan to recruit Harry Potter into our ranks," exclaimed Wormtail.

"So quickly," the Dark Lord asked, feigning incredulity. "I must say, this is an impressive display of wits. Please, continue." Voldemort silently cursed himself for falling into his old habit of toying with the doomed. The Tornadoes were ahead 140-110 but there had already been three exciting pursuits of the Snitch and a Wronski feint that had nearly killed the Tutshill Seeker who attempted it.

Wormtail looked as though he would like to outline the plan, but

Snape cut him off. "My Lord, this plan was mostly of Draco's creation so I believe he ought to present it."

Voldemort nodded his assent, and the youngest Malfoy spoke. "My Lord, if we know anything about Harry Potter, we know that he values the lives of his friends far above his own. He would do absolutely anything to prevent them or their families from coming into harm's way."

Voldemort knew what Potter had done to Ron Weasley mere weeks before but allowed Draco to continue uninterrupted, quelling his urge to snort.

"We also know that after the attack on Ron Weasley, Potter's famous 'Golden Trio' is down to only two members: Potter and the Mudblood Hermione Granger. She is now his best remaining friend, and rumors have swirled for years – both at Hogwarts and in the press – that the two of them are romantically involved." Draco had pronounced "Golden Trio" with as much venom as he could muster, but Voldemort noticed that the idea of Potter – scion of two wealthy and influential pureblood families – had gotten involved with a Mudblood inspired even greater spite in him.

"Snape tells us that the Mudblood is now living with Potter at the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix, where they are obviously untouchable. However, we believe that if we were to kidnap Granger's parents, a promise of their release would be enough to persuade Potter to join our ranks. That is the heart of our plan, my Lord."

Malfoy then proceeded to lay out a remarkably convoluted scheme to kidnap the Granger family that revolved around setting fire to their house and casting the Imperius curse on firefighters sent to put out the blaze. He had begun to delineate the backup plan, which was to send Imperiused policemen to arrest the Grangers at their dental practice when Voldemort finally could not take it any longer and cut

him off.

"Thank you, Draco. This is quite a fine plan you have devised," he said, his cold high-pitched voice like an iron fist beneath a silk glove. The junior Death Eater bowed ostentatiously. "May I ask you just one question, though?"

"Anything, my Lord!" Draco's voice was full of pride, but Snape and Wormtail subtly backed away. The Dark Lord never asked permission for anything unless he was about to inflict particularly horrible pain upon a victim.

Voldemort conjured an easel with a detailed map of Great Britain upon it. "Can you point out on this map where the Grangers live? Here, put a pin in their city." Voldemort conjured a green pushpin and banished it at Draco, who caught it.

Draco strode toward the easel with the intent of putting the pin in dot marked "London," but found that he could not; some invisible force pushed his hand aside before it reached its mark. Draco looked at Voldemort hopelessly and saw that his master was watching him with an arched eyebrow.

"Is there something wrong with that pin," Voldemort asked, no longer bothering to hide the sarcasm in his voice. "Here, try one of these." The Dark Lord conjured some twenty more green pushpins, which fell to the carpeted floor and scattered around Draco's feet.

Even Draco realized now that he had done something terribly wrong, but he did not dare refuse an order from his master. He knelt down to pick one up but went sprawling over when a boot connected with his back. Lord Voldemort had risen from his throne and kicked the Malfoy scion to the ground.

The evil wizard leaned over Draco's ear and hissed, "It won't work, you idiot." Voldemort straightened up and flicked his wand. Instantly,

all the pushpins scattered about the floor were transfigured into ice picks. With another two waves, the picks became red hot and then began attacking Draco, flying at him and stabbing him repeatedly in the arms, legs and back as he desperately curled into a fetal position to protect his vital organs.

Voldemort turned his back on Draco's screams and turned to Snape and Wormtail. "The Grangers' home is fortified with every magical defense Dumbledore has to offer, save the Fidelius Charm. Any attempt to kidnap or kill them would take a full-scale assault to succeed, and would waste resources that I need for my other plans."

He fixed Snape with a particularly malevolent glare. "Listen to me carefully for I will only say this once," he hissed. "If this task were in any way easy, I would have done it already. Do not come back to me with another plan like this one, for you will regret it. Now get out of my sight." Voldemort dismissed the pair with his hand and Wormtail and Snape bolted from the room, eternally pleased that they had escaped without a round of torture.

Voldemort cancelled the ice picks' assault on Draco and called for a house-elf to take the boy away and give him medical care. When he finally was alone, he retrieved his portable Wireless receiver and tuned it to the station the game had been on.

"Well folks that's all from Tutshill Stadium for this evening," the announcer said. "Once again, the Harpies have defeated the Tornados by the score of 280 to 240, for Jon Morgan and Andrew Aaronson, I'm Joe Miller." The station began playing a new Celestina Warbeck song and Voldemort clicked the device off in disgust.

"Typical."

As he listened to the prophecy, Harry's first thought was to notice how very similar the wording was to the original. If Dumbledore had manipulated his memory from the Penseive, it would not have taken

much effort to tweak it into his version.

But had he? Harry had only known Grabtooth for a little over a month. As for Blaise well, he didn't know her at all, except that she had never seemed to be in Malfoy's group. Even still, she was a Slytherin, wasn't she? Couldn't she also be a Death Eater in training, only less obvious about it than Malfoy?

But then Harry remembered his encounter with Dumbledore after the goblins had shown him Sirius' Will. He remembered the look of complete panic and fury that had crossed Dumbledore's face as he asked Harry about his involvement with the goblins. At the time, Harry had wondered what had inspired this much fear in the normally unflappable Headmaster, the same one who had sat serenely by as Harry destroyed his office after revealing the prophecy just a month earlier. This was it.

Harry reached over and grabbed the parchment where Hermione had copied down Trelawney's words and read the prophecy again, to make sure he had not missed anything.

It read:

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches

Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies

And the Dark Lord will mark him as his servant, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not

The Dark Lord must die at the hand of The One for neither can rule while the other survives

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies

The sound of shrill yelling brought Harry out of his contemplation. "This can't possibly be right!" Tonks was in a mild state of hysteria. "The Dark Lord will mark him as his servant," she quoted frantically. "Harry would sooner die than join the Death Eaters!"

Hermione was biting her lip, a sure sign that she was either thinking very hard or else very upset. Whichever it was – and Harry realized that in this instance it might be both – she was not talking.

In fact, Blaise was first to respond to Tonks. "I don't doubt that Harry would never voluntarily join the Death Eaters," she began. "But in this instance he might not have a choice. Voldemort knows that your continued survival makes him look weak. Not counting your famous encounter when you were a baby, Voldemort has personally tried to kill you four times, including twice since he regained his body. He's able to explain it away to the Death Eaters by noting how lucky you have been, but he knows that a third failed attempt on your life would have disastrous effects on his credibility. He might even face another mutiny like the ones that plagued him in his first reign. So, rather than risk another failed murder attempt, he will recruit you into the Death Eaters. If you can't beat 'em..." Blaise trailed off, leaving the proverb unfinished but her meaning clear.

Harry was impressed that Blaise could say Voldemort's name but was not sold. "So let him try and recruit me then," he said defiantly. "Why would Voldemort be any more successful at that than he would at killing me?"

Blaise shook her head sadly. "I forget that you are somewhat new to our world, Harry. Voldemort would succeed because he has never, ever failed in recruiting someone that he wanted. Think about this, Harry. It's very easy for you to say now that you would never join Voldemort, but you've never seen his methods. What would you do if he kidnapped Arthur and Molly Weasley and said he'd kill them if you didn't join?"

"I'd try to rescue them," said Harry instantly.

"And if you couldn't?" asked Blaise. "What if he was housing them in the deepest dungeons of his lair, guarded 24/7 by dementors, werewolves, a squadron of Death Eaters and Voldemort himself?" Harry was stumped, and Blaise pressed her advantage. "What if Voldemort kidnapped Hermione, Harry? What if he said he'd send you a new body part of hers every day you didn't join him? What if he sent you photographs of her being cut, burned, whipped or raped? How long would you last before you signed up?"

Harry and Hermione blanched and Blaise backed off. "I'm not trying to upset you," she said, giving what was clearly supposed to be a reassuring nod to Hermione. "I'm merely trying to make you aware of the methods the Dark Lord uses. It isn't as simple as him politely asking."

Blaise sighed. "Besides, even if you managed to resist his tactics, that's no guarantee you wouldn't wind up serving him. Tell me, do you have any connection to Voldemort though that famous scar of yours?:

Harry could only nod, incredulous that Blaise could know such a thing. "My father is an Unspeakable, Harry. Perhaps you've heard of him, he goes by the codename 'Croaker.' Anyhow, it is fairly common that a curse scar forges some sort of connection between the curser and the cursed, usually in the form of a extra-sensory perception to detect when the other is nearby. But a scar from a curse that strong, and right on your head too...I would not be surprised if Voldemort was able to possess you – or at least influence your thoughts – through that scar. If nothing else, he should be able to put you through unspeakable torment by sending visions designed to break your spirit if you will not join him. Harry, he will break you and you will join him, whether you want to or not."

"The only question, then," Blaise continued, "is whether you join him on your own terms or on his terms, and obviously if you're coming to him after he's threatened to kill the Weasleys, you're not exactly in a strong bargaining position. What I...or rather, what we think," and here Blaise made a motion indicating Grabtooth as well, "is that you ought to join Voldemort of your own free will."

Harry scoffed. "Fuck that!" he spat, and he made to stand up, but Hermione's arm stayed his ascent.

"I think I understand," she said, eyeing Blaise closely. "You're convinced that Harry will become a servant of Voldemort's no matter what he does, because of this prophecy." Blaise nodded.

"And you want to make sure that Harry becomes a Death Eater under the most favorable conditions possible...so that he can have the most negotiating room over what role he'll fill among the Death Eaters?" Blaise nodded again.

"And this is important because what role he plays will play a key role in determining how much of his soul he retains for when Voldemort has been killed."

"Exactly," said Blaise, and this time she gave Hermione a smile that could only be described as heart-stopping; Harry was briefly reminded of a recurring dream he'd had about what the pretty Slytherin girl might have wanted to do in this meeting, but quickly shook himself out of it.

Blaise was talking again. "Harry, you've used the Unforgivable curses, you know the feeling of euphoria that you get after using them. It's highly addictive and it corrupts your soul. You must remember the rest of the prophecy: The Dark Lord must die at the hand of The One for neither can rule while the other survives. It isn't said explicitly, but the implication is clear: once you kill Voldemort, you will rule this country, at least for a little while. The question becomes simple: will

you govern with the attempt to undo the evil Voldemort has wrought? Or will you be just like him, an evil wizard corrupted by dark magic and seeking only to cause death and destruction?"

Blaise paused for a deep breath, and continued with a righteous passion that Harry had only ever seen when Hermione reached the climax of her S.P.E.W. rants. "Dumbledore thinks you're doomed to the latter. His overriding goal is to keep you as weak as possible so that after you kill Voldemort, he can kill you without too much trouble. He sees you as a weapon, plain and simple.

"But I don't, Harry. I think that if you do this properly, you can lead us to great things. You can fundamentally change the wizarding world in a million positive ways. And if it's at all possible, I'd like to be there at your side when you do it. You don't know me Harry, but I know you enough to see your potential. I believe in you and if you'll let me, I'll follow you to the end."

Harry studied the blonde Slytherin as intensely as he could, watching closely for any sign that this might all be a trick, some crack in the girl's countenance that might reveal treachery. He found none. Instead, Harry was again struck by the passion and certainty in her eyes and knew that Blaise believed every word she had spoken.

Harry looked at Grabtooth and was unsurprised to find that the goblin was fixing him with his usual calculating stare. As far as Harry knew, the goblins were a cunning and greedy race, but not an evil one. They valued money above almost all else to be sure, but they scorned short-term windfalls in favor of continuous long-term growth. Grabtooth would not have allowed himself to be bribed into this meeting, not if it would benefit Voldemort. Goblins knew their lot would be much worse under rule by the Dark Lord.

Harry turned to Tonks and Hermione. Tonks looked apprehensive, Hermione was resolute. The girls would follow him, no doubt about that. Tonks would follow him out of family loyalty if for no other

reason and Hermione...Hermione seemed to know more about the situation than he did and she was sure of herself. The last of the Golden Trio would follow him to the gates of Hell whether he asked or not. As if to confirm his thoughts, Hermione gave a small nod.

Finally, Harry spoke. "OK, Blaise," he said, turning to the blonde once more. "I'm in. How do we do this?"

Author's Note: First, I realized that I've yet to come up with a consistent style for formatting the beginning of my author's notes - sometimes i use "AN:" or "A/N" and any number of other variations. I've decided I'm going to stick with what I've done for this chapter, it feels right.

Now, to business. A bunch of you responded to my request to leave reviews and to you I say, "." I LOVE REVIEWS!!!! Really can't stress this point enough.

However, as many reviews as I got since I last updated this story, I have the distinct feeling that I could have gotten a lottttt more. So, to further incentivize you to leave reviews, I'm going to go back to giving shoutouts to good reviewers in these Author's Notes. If you want to see your screenname in print, all you have to do is leave a good review. Here's this chapter's bunch (not in any particular order):

To Thyrokio2: Your review about how killing a house-elf in front of Hermione would be like drowning thousands of puppies made me laugh hellllllllaaaaaa hard. Very well played.

To LilTank: I doubt very much that you'll see this, but on the off chance that you do, here goes nothing. Yours was the first negative review this story has received in a long time (probably a function of the big gaps between updates lol), so I've got to give it airtime. Your criticism that the first chapter or 2 are cliched is absolutely a legitimate one. In fact, I am the first one to admit that the first couple chapters don't rate very high on the originality meter. However, I think

that if you can overlook them and keep going into the meat of the story (which is just now beginning), I believe you'll find this story to be quite original and better written than 99% of fan fiction to boot.

To LoireLoa: Read my above note to LilTank, although with a grain of salt because you seem to already be doing what I suggested LilTank do. Thanks so much for the thoughtful review!

To Loony Dagda: I think I answered most of your questions in this chapter, but I just wanted to give a shout-out because your review made me smile more than usual. Keep sending me your thoughts!

To Alorkin: Yours is easily the longest review ever submitted to this story. I've already PMed you my thoughts about it, but I just wanted to publicly thank you for the kind words and insight.

That's 5, so I'll leave it there. If I didn't respond to your review, please please please do not be offended you are just as valuable to me as the others. Keep reviewing!

To answer some more general queries that seem to come up frequently:

-For all of you getting headaches from following my numbers clue...keep trying! Send me your thoughts! You'll get nothing more out of me though, unless you PM me.

-If you are wondering why Blaise is a girl...the name "Blaise" is gender-neutral and until Book 6, JKR does not define Blaise's gender. Remember that nothing after Book 5 is canon in my HP Universe. I think the character is more interesting if she's female, so female she is. If you're wondering why she's blonde...its because blondes have more fun LDO

-The last chapter was the 2nd longest of the whole story, so those of you complaining it was "short" are way off base. That said, I

obviously made this one longer. Don't think you can bully me into long updates all the time though.

I don't think anything else really needs to be said. As always, if you have questions or thoughts or anything else you'd like to share with me, leave a review or send a PM! Until next time...

Chapter Eight: The Snake's Jaw

After his meeting with Blaise, Harry's birthday had gone about as smoothly as it could have, all things considered. While he was still shell-shocked by the new prophecy and Blaise's plan, he still managed to have a highly enjoyable time. Harry had invited Blaise to spend the rest of the day with himself, Hermione and Tonks, and so the whole group – Grabtooth and Stillstone included – made their way to Gringotts for the reading of the Potter will. This was a relatively simple affair; Lily and James had simply left everything to Harry and Sirius, which of course meant that all of it went to Harry. It had been a sad moment when Harry realized that Lupin had not been left anything because his parents had believed him a spy, and another one when he realized that even 15 years ago, his family had had no living relatives.

Still, for the first time in his life, Harry had actually celebrated his birthday. Even if they had never left the confines of the Leaky Cauldron, the company of the three girls would certainly have been sufficient to rate his 16th as Harry's best birthday. After the will reading, Tonks determined that a wizard of Harry's stature ought to always be dressed in the finest attire available and dragged the young noble along on a several-hour tour of Diagon Alley's finest clothiers. After dinner, an extravagant affair at another top Muggle restaurant Hermione knew through her parents, the group returned to Grimmauld Place briefly to slip into some of their new purchases before heading out to Alchemy, the largest Wizarding nightclub in London. Harry did not remember much from this night as the management had been all too willing to supply the Boy-Who-Lived with a private table in the VIW section and a seemingly endless supply of magical spirits, although a receipt from the Knight Bus told Harry that he and the girls had arrived back at Grimmauld Place at 5:20am.

When he had finally stumbled out of bed and into the kitchen the following afternoon, Harry was shocked to see the lead headline of

The Daily Prophet.

The Chosen Drunk? Harry Potter Turns 16 With a Bang

Boy Savior Has Alcohol-Fueled Birthday Bash With Auror, Classmates at Alchemy

Pictures in Style section, pages 1-5

As Harry began to skim through the article, Hermione joined him at the rough kitchen table and laughed slightly when she saw what he was reading.

"This really isn't funny, you know," said Harry, who had decided to at least skim the article before he had to face the pictures. "Though the his table was kept stocked with plenty of hard liquor courtesy of Alchemy management, The Boy Who Lived still managed to run up a 1,200 Galleon bar tab by purchasing multiple bottles of premium spirits for every partygoer in attendance. When asked by this reporter to comment on his extravagance, Potter merely yelled, 'IT'S A CELEBRATION, BITCHES!' and resumed dancing," Harry quoted.

Hermione laughed harder at this, and Harry shook his head in embarrassment. "I suppose that is a little bit funny," he admitted, "but it makes me look like a bloody fool. But there's other parts in here that are legitimately worrisome for us. Like here, it names all three of you...Potter arrived at the club with three women whom The Daily Prophet has since identified as fellow rising 6th Year Hogwarts students Hermione Granger and Blaise Zabini along with Auror Nymphadora Tonks. I mean, at the very least it won't do good for Blaise's prospects in Slytherin if they know we're friends."

"Oh don't worry about that, Harry," said Blaise, who had just entered the room with Tonks. "The rest of my house already knows that I do not share their views. Even if they didn't know that, Voldemort knows who my parents are and can infer my position from that."

Harry nodded and returned to the newspaper, scanning the spread of photographs taken of him and the girls taken the previous night. As far as he was concerned, most of the photos were relatively mundane, simply depicting his interactions at his table and dancing out on the floor. In the only one he considered particularly interesting, Harry's photographic self was busy ogling a pair of witches snogging on the dance floor, then appeared to notice the camera and started yelling excitedly and waving a lime-green concoction in his hands, sloshing some out of the glass and onto his own head.

Harry was vaguely aware that Tonks and Hermione had begun cooking breakfast – if a meal that began at 2 o'clock could be called that – as he reached up to feel his hair. Sure enough, it was sticky with set-in fruit juice. He glanced over at Blaise, who was watching him and holding back a snicker.

"I seem to have made a bit of an arse of myself," he said sheepishly.

Blaise slid closer to Harry on the wooden bench and playfully bumped him with her shoulder. "That you did," she grinned. "But yours is a cute arse so we'll forgive you for now, yeah?"

Harry simply smirked and returned to the paper. When she wasn't revealing new prophecies and outlining schemes to kill Voldemort, Blaise had a light, outgoing, flirty personality that was a nice compliment to Hermione's passion and Tonks' exuberance. Blaise seemed completely at ease with herself at all times and seemed to rarely deviate from a fundamentally happy baseline mood.

On some level, Harry was aware that Blaise was attempting to use him for her own ends; she was, after all, a Slytherin. By revealing the true prophecy to him and outlining the grand strategy for defeating Voldemort, she was securing a place for herself in his eventual power structure. Blaise certainly had some ideas about how he ought to reorganize Wizarding society once Harry rose to his place at the

top and would no doubt press on him to do things her way. However, Harry found that somehow, he didn't really care. Blaise would be loyal to him at least until he demonstrated that he wouldn't be doing things her way, which meant that he could count on her at least until Voldemort's death. At that point, if he happened to agree with Blaise's ideas, she would stay on and help him implement them; if he didn't agree, she would quickly leave of her own accord. There was something comforting about the simplicity of this arrangement, there was none of the part-truths and deception that marked his relationship with Dumbledore – no authority to abuse or trust to betray. And if he gained a new friendship or even a romantic interest through his relationship with Blaise – and Harry suspected at least one of these was likely to occur, he found that he quite enjoyed the company of the girl – so much the better.

Just as would any other 16 year old, Harry found himself thinking about potential romance frequently, perhaps more frequently than normal given the three attractive witches with whom he shared a house. To his own surprise, however, Harry found that he was not more drawn to any of his housemates more than the others; they each had distinct charms that Harry was not sure he could choose between. Blaise had the undeniable sex appeal, Tonks – despite her somewhat goofy nature – had real world experience and perspective, and Hermione had...well, Hermione was simply the most important person in Harry's life, but whether that translated into a relationship beyond the platonic was unclear to him.

Alas, Harry had very little time to spend actually pursuing relations with any of his housemates. The Platinum Quartet – as the four now jokingly referred to themselves – was immersed in preparations for Harry's infiltration of Voldemort's organization, a plot which would have to be executed perfectly to succeed. What little of Harry's time remained was spent learning about the structure of the two lawmaking bodies of which he was to become a member: the Wizengamot and the International Confederation of Wizards. Like seemingly all other aspects of the wizarding world, these institutions

were governed by needlessly complicated and grossly inefficient rules, not least confusing of which were the ones concerning voting. Unlike Muggle legislatures, where each member typically counted for precisely one vote, hereditary members of the Wizengamot were allotted multiple votes based on a multi-tiered categorizing scheme that ranked the various families according to their age, purity, wealth, and the deeds of their ancestors. The Black Family – though very old and wealthy – had little in the way of truly notable ancestry and fell just short of many of the prescribed milestones and thus their seat was worth only 4 votes. The Potters, on the other hand, apparently dated back prior to the founding of Hogwarts and had on at least one occasion defeated a Dark Lord, meaning that their seat was worth 9 votes. In all, the 13 votes under Harry's control were the most for one individual since Athene Gaunt, who controlled 20 votes after her family merged with the Slytherin line.

Harry was also busy brainstorming plausible excuses for him to leave Hogwarts. It did not necessarily need to be a permanent split from the castle – although that might be easiest – but if Blaise's plan was to work he would have to be able to leave the castle each and every day, without fail. He supposed that if it came down to it, he could simply sneak out of the castle every night using his Invisibility Cloak and the secret passage under the statue of the one-eyed witch, but the journey to Honeydukes' cellar was arduous and Harry doubted he could sustain that trip without raising a great number of questions. Using some sort of reusable Portkey was also possible – Harry knew all too well that one could Portkey off Hogwarts grounds – but he didn't believe for a second that Dumbledore couldn't track at least incoming Portkeys, and it was imperative that Dumbledore not know what he was doing. Still, Harry was not sure how he could leave Hogwarts outright without attracting a huge amount of unwanted attention.

On the Wednesday after his birthday, Harry stepped outside and flagged down the Knight Bus. The girls were busy in a planning session and Harry, never a brilliant tactician, had decided it was high

time to begin his portion of the scheme to defeat Voldemort and taken his leave.

"Well I'll be!" exclaimed Stan Shunpike, the pimply and excitable conductor of the Knight Bus. "Look 'ere, Ern! It's 'Arry Potter!"

"Hello," grimaced Harry, cursing himself for not getting around to his Apparition license yet. "How much to get to Newham?"

"Newham?" yelped Stan, "why that'd only be 'bout six Sickles! 'Choo wanna go to Newham fer?"

Harry ignored this question and pushed six Sickles into Stan's hand as he made his way onto the bus and selected one of the rickety chairs on the first level. Struck by a sudden inspiration, Harry placed Temporary Sticking Charms on the back legs of his chair before sitting down and was rewarded when he was not sent sprawling by the bus' first BANG.

"Quite some party you had the other night, eh?" smirked Stan, following Harry to his seat. Harry merely rolled his eyes, but Stan was not done.

"Yep, sure wish I'd'a been at Alchemy that night, ne'er 'ad a bottle o' firewhisky bought by the Chosen One, 'ave I, Ern?"

"Look, Stan, can you do me a favor? Just tell me when we get to Upton Park, alright?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Potter," said Stan. "But 'ow about them ladies at Alchemy, eh? 'Id you get lucky 'at night, then?"

Harry tuned Stan out and focused all his energies on resisting the urge to curse the man. If he was supposed to survive seven months at Voldemort's right hand with his soul intact, he wouldn't do himself any favors by giving the simple conductor his just deserts...

Lord Voldemort was, as usual, completely fed up with the incompetent fools he was unfortunate enough to call his Death Eaters. Snape and Wormtail were making no progress whatsoever in coming up with a feasible plan to bring Harry Potter into the fold. Most of this failure was due to not knowing precisely where Potter was or how to get a message to him. For instance, it would have been relatively easy to use one of their low-level spies within the Ministry to kidnap Arthur Weasley in the Ministry lobby before he could Apparate to the safety of the Burrow. However, once they had captured Arthur, what would the next step be? Snape reported that Harry had sealed himself off from all contact with the Order of the Phoenix and therefore might not know that Arthur was even missing for several days.

Voldemort supposed that he could issue some sort of public message, perhaps writing "Harry Potter: Join me now or Arthur Weasley dies" in blood on a wall someplace. The problem with that idea, however, was precisely that it was so public; Potter would become an intense object of suspicion forevermore and lose his incredible potential value as a spy. Indeed, Voldemort wasn't sure he ever wanted the public at large to know the Boy Who Lived was a Death Eater, and certainly not before Dumbledore was killed and the Ministry fell. Once that happened, Potter would be the natural rallying point for anyone who dared to still oppose Voldemort's power. Potter could draw all the dissenters into one meeting, and then Voldemort would arrive and slaughter them all. Voldemort grinned at the thought.

The grin quickly melted into a frown as Voldemort's thoughts drifted to Potter's classmate Draco Malfoy. Since he had attacked the boy, Draco had simply lost his nerve. The once irrepressibly arrogant aristocratic scion had become a shell of his former self: where he had once strutted, he now skulked; jumping at small noises and squashing all independent thoughts before he could articulate them. On the rare occasion Draco became aware that Voldemort was

watching him he would cower in fear until the Dark Lord had passed. Voldemort always strove to ensure that his followers were sufficiently afraid of him that they would follow orders without question and such, but the level of terror Draco was exhibiting now was simply counter-productive. Worse, it was unclear to Voldemort whether a strong Cruciatus Curse would set the boy right or only further damage him.

In the old days, of course, Voldemort would have happily cursed Draco without a second thought, consequences for the boy's psyche be damned. But today, the situation had changed. As useless as the boy was in his present condition, a completely catatonic Malfoy would be worse, and Voldemort simply didn't have enough followers to waste Draco right now. Worse than that, Lucius Malfoy would be furious if he found out that

Voldemort had ruined Draco, and despite being in Azkaban, Lucius Malfoy was one of the few Death Eaters with enough cachet with the rest to start a full-blown mutiny. Again, in the old days, Voldemort could simply have killed Malfoy to preempt the threat but today he simply couldn't afford the loss. And so, Lucius Malfoy, despite his idiocy and his threat to Voldemort's reign, would live and his son Draco would continue in his uselessness unpunished.

Voldemort sighed and shifted restlessly in his throne. There was no Quidditch on today, he had read every book worth his time in the Malfoy library and he just wasn't in the mood for a routine spot of Muggle torture...it was simply too easy. Voldemort needed a challenge – perhaps not an insurmountable one like storming Hogwarts on his own, but something that would legitimately test his cunning and magical skill, something he could feel proud about when he had completed it. Voldemort's eyes drifted down to the copy of The Daily Prophet on the end table next to his throne and watched the small photographic version of Minister Fudge on the front page give some sort of speech.

Struck by a sudden inspiration, Voldemort summoned his house elf

and ordered it to bring Snape to him. While he waited for the Potions Master to arrive, the Dark Lord allowed himself a grin. He had a solution to both of his problems.

Harry stepped out of the stairwell on the third floor of The Napoleonic, a dingy apartment complex in Newham. The building had been constructed in the height of the Cold War and though there were few better places to live in the event of a nuclear exchange, it was sorely lacking in all aesthetic respects. Harry walked down the barren, once-white cinderblock hallway toward room 314, Harry couldn't help but think about what a depressing place this must have been to grow up in and briefly wondered whether the cupboard under the stairs had not been the bleakest place to spend a childhood.

Harry reached his destination and rapped his knuckles smartly on the door. Before long, the door opened and a diminutive black woman appeared in the frame. "Yes," she asked, a distinct edge to her voice. "What do you want? I'm warning you, I don't take well to solicitors."

"Ms. Thomas, I presume," asked Harry. "My name is Harry Potter, I'm here to see Dean and Seamus?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Potter, come right in!" said Ms. Thomas, whose demeanor had instantly defrosted. "The boys are in the other room, can I fix you anything?"

"No thank you, ma'am," said Harry, smiling as he crossed the threshold into the apartment. It was larger than Harry had imagined. The small entryway opened into a large living room, tastefully furnished with the usual Muggle accoutrements. A medium-sized kitchen was partially separated from the far right side of the living room by a generous archway. A hallway presumably leading to the bedrooms exited the left side of the living room. It's much nicer than you would guess, thought Harry, who had expected to encounter at least as many rats as humans in the apartment.

Harry helped himself to a large lounge opposite the living room's sofa and loveseat set and looked pleasantly up at Ms. Thomas, who was hovering expectantly.

"The boys are in Dean's bedroom...it's the second door on the left," she said, her voice gaining a faint hint of nerves. "Would you like to join them?"

"No ma'am, what I have to say to them concerns you as well. Please, have a seat." Harry indicated the loveseat with his left hand and yelled down the hallway. "Oy! Dean and Seamus! Get your asses out here!"

The two best friends emerged from the bedroom wearing identical smirks.

"Well, well if it isn't Harry Potter," said Dean, reaching Harry first. "Good to see you've got all the pineapple juice and curacao out of your hair, I was worried they'd have to shave you."

Harry covered his face with a palm and shook his head.

"Yeah Harry, why don't you ever party like that in Gryffindor," asked Seamus. "It would be loads of fun to throw a rager like that in the common room, even if you are a bloody lightweight."

"Can't say I fault you for the company you keep though, Zabini and that Auror are mighty fine catches...hell, even Granger..."

"Stuff it, both of you," said Harry, cutting Dean off and ignoring Seamus' sniggers. "I'm here on serious business, both of you know that."

"Yeah we know, Harry," said Seamus, sobering himself. "What's going on, your letter wasn't particularly illuminating." Dean nodded his agreement.

"Well, you guys obviously know that the war against Voldemort is about to heat up. And you also know that one way or another, I'm going to be a key player in the war, right? With me so far?"

Both teens nodded.

"That's good that both of you understand that. Unfortunately, there are other people – highly placed, important people – who are not so convinced. Very soon, I am going to have to demonstrate to these people that I am a valuable asset. Still with me?"

Again, Dean and Seamus nodded.

"It is my belief that there are a great number of people – both our age and older – that would follow me rather than the Ministry or even Dumbledore. I believe that this is my real value in this war, as a leader and a rallying point for the forces of good..."

"So you're looking to make the D.A. a little more extracurricular," said Dean, cutting off Harry's sentence

"You're close," said Harry, smiling. "I see no need to involve the mouth-breathers, young ones and traitors from the old D.A., nor do I see any utility in limiting membership to present or even recent Hogwarts students. You should also know that I'm not asking for your oath or absolute commitment right this moment. I want you to think on this for a few days."

"What sort of commitment will you be looking for in the future? What level of danger are we in for?"

"I'm not looking for people to follow me into open, full-scale battle," said Harry. "This group will be involved in much more covert actions than that. But I'd be lying if I didn't tell you some of our activities will involve mortal risk. I wouldn't let you go into those situations

unprepared, however. You'll be trained in advanced combat and other areas to ensure you can defend yourself and give at least as good as you get. "

Harry turned to Ms. Thomas now and said, "That's the main reason you're here, Ms. Thomas. In addition to the danger, you ought to know that if Dean will join me, he's going to need to come live with me. I own a small chain of islands in the Mediterranean and Dean would need to be there for the large majority of the summer and Christmas holidays."

"I just don't understand," said Ms. Thomas. "Why must you be the ones fighting the war? What about your Headmaster, Dumbledore?"

"To put it bluntly, Professor Dumbledore doesn't intend for me to live through the end of this conflict. In fact, if I don't die of my own accord, I am convinced he will kill me himself." Everyone in the room gasped, and Seamus in particular goggled at Harry in disbelief.

"But wh..."

"I can't get into why right now," said Harry. "The reason why is an extremely closely held secret, but trust me when I say that Dumbledore means to see me dead before this war ends. He has his reasons; they're even good reasons if you accept his flawed premises. But obviously, I'm not going to accept that outcome. So I'm going at this alone."

"Harry, mate," said Seamus, speaking for the first time. "Dumbledore wanting to kill you is the most insane thing I've ever heard. But I've taken you for a liar before and I've learned me lesson. I know you said you wanted me to wait, and me mam'll throw a fit, but my mind's made up. If this is true, I'm with ya 'til the end."

Dean took a long, heavy glance at Seamus and then at his mother, who had apparently yet to fully process everything. After a minute, he

nodded his assent too.

Over the next several days, Harry had similar meetings with many of the D.A. Though a handful – the Weasley twins, Katie Bell, Alicia Spinnet, Angelina Johnson, and (strangely, Harry thought) Ernie Macmillan – gave Harry swift and unequivocal declarations of support, the rest were more cautious in their response. It was as Harry had expected: despite the bond that had developed in the previous year, it was unrealistic to expect a bunch of teenagers to commit their lives to him on a moment's notice. He had also sent Tonks to take the temperature of Kingsley, Moody and Lupin. Though Harry had little interest in having the older wizards active in the operational side of his group, but they would be highly useful as spies and potentially even as instructors once Harry had his group settled on Alphard's Atoll.

For their part, the female contingent of the Platinum Quartet was starting to make great breakthroughs. Two mornings after Harry met with Luna (from which Harry had emerged more unsure about Luna's status in his group than when he arrived), the Boy Who Lived had his breakfast interrupted by a massive flickering of the kitchen's lights and a high-pitched shout of joy from above. Harry climbed the staircase to the library to investigate and found all three witches high-fiving each other and sporting ear-to-ear grins.

"What's going on," Harry asked, a touch bemused by the girls' antics.

"Oh Harry, it's wonderful!" exclaimed Hermione, rushing over and pulling him bodily into the thick of their celebration. "Blaise congealed ambient magic!"

"And she got the pulse?"

Hermione simply nodded emphatically and bit her lip in a vain attempt to regain composure.

Harry could not help but grin broadly at this news. Though wizards had perfected many stealth techniques – including, of course, making themselves invisible and silent – there was no spell that could fool Muggle motion detectors, pressure sensors, and trip lasers. For most of wizardkind this deficiency was perfectly acceptable, but it was almost devastating for Harry, Hermione, Blaise and Tonks and their plan to kill Voldemort. The four had scoured the library for any reference to such spells when Hermione hit upon the answer. Knowing that high concentrations of magic were highly disruptive to electronic equipment, Hermione theorized that if one could force the ambient magic of a given area into a small, concentrated ball, the ambient magic would combine with the magic used to capture it. When this process completed, the ball of magic would collapse upon itself and produce a massive pulse of raw magic. If done in the presence of Muggle electronics, this pulse would have the same effect as the EMP blast accompanying a nuclear bomb, overloading any electronic device in range with magical energy and causing it to shut down. If the theory was accurate, one could create the pulse in a room secured by any combination of advanced Muggle security measures and then walk through without setting off so much as a fire alarm.

"You want to go test it?"

"YES," said Blaise, noticing Harry for the first time. "Where should we go?"

"I dunno, go rob a bank or something," said Harry, still smiling. "Just make sure it's a really big one, we can't be too careful with this."

"Aye aye, captain," said Tonks and the three girls scurried out of the room, still tittering excitedly. Harry smiled one more time before summoning Kreacher.

"You called, Master," sneered the aged house elf. "How ever can I be of service to you?"

"I need a complete list of all the Black Penthouse locations right away," he told the elf. "Be a good elf and fetch that for me now."

"Yes, Master," sneered the elf again before wandering out of the room. Harry was disappointed that the elf hadn't issued one of his trademark muttered rants, but assumed that Blaise or Tonks had ordered it to stop, and put it out of his mind.

When the girls returned a half hour later, they found Harry at the desk in his bedroom, going through a large stack of folders. Hermione knocked on the already-open door to announce their presence.

"Oh excellent, come in come in," said Harry. "How did it go?"

"Well," said Blaise as she and Hermione entered the room took seats on Harry's bed. Tonks remained standing. "The pulse knocked out the trip lasers, pressure sensors and motion detectors of the vault, as well as the sensors on the doors of the safe deposit boxes. So we were able to access anything we wanted in the vault."

"The only snag was that it didn't knock out the sensors by the door that trigger when a bundle of cash passes out of the vault," said Tonks.

"But we're not really expecting the museum to employ anything like that are we," asked Harry.

"Nope, no chance," said Hermione. "They would risk damaging an invaluable artifact by embedding a security feature like that in it. We'll be just fine."

"Awesome," said Harry. "Help me out on this then, would you?" He indicated the large stack of folders on the desk. "I'm not sure which of the Penthouses we should use to get there...the Blacks never got one in Cairo for some reason."

"Not a big enough port, I expect," said Hermione. "They got those to oversee the shipping business, right?"

"Yeah good point," said Harry. "Anyhow, the two closest ones are in Port Said and Jeddah. Said is obviously much closer but I worry that its not really large enough to have a Portkey office that speaks English..."

"Don't worry about that Harry," said Blaise. "We don't want to travel as wizards anyways. You'll be a recognizable face even to Middle Eastern wizards and we want to leave as few tracks as possible...if Voldemort figure,s out or even suspects what we're up to this will never work."

"Blaise is right," said Tonks, who was starting to pace. "It would probably be helpful if you were seen in public in London on the evening we do it, and again the following morning...preferably with some plausible story for where you were between those times..."

Tonks turned suddenly and stared at Blaise. It was apparently a meaningful look, because after a brief moment, Blaise let out a soft "oh," and then nodded decisively at the Auror. Harry was bewildered by all of this, but Tonks answered his question before he could ask it.

"Harry, you're going to need to go on a date with Blaise...two dates actually."

"Huh?" Harry didn't see what this had to do with anything.

"Don't you see, Harry? If you take Blaise out to some posh restaurant in Diagon Alley the night we steal it...I don't know, Pewter or Bulstrode's or some place like that...and then you take her out for breakfast the next morning in Diagon Alley again, the gossip reporters will go nuts! 'Harry Potter has posh date in Diagon Alley,' 'Blaise Zabini: The Chosen One's Chosen One?'...this will be

headline news for probably a week! Every wizard in Britain will 'know' that you spent that night having wild sex, its perfect!"

"Wait..."

"Even better," said Blaise, running with the idea, "we let them see Harry take me back to The Leaky Cauldron. We'll rent a room and let the reporters see us go up into it. Once we're inside we can seal the door, put up an Imperturbable Charm, maybe have Harry cast a couple contraceptive charms on the off chance the Ministry's got any sensors up, and then we can take a Portkey to Heathrow and take the next plane to Cairo as Muggles! Then after we get back, we take another Portkey back into the room, emerge wearing the same clothes as last night and go get breakfast! That's as airtight an alibi as I can think of!"

"Now wait, hold on just one minute," said Harry, who was frankly dizzied by the girls' pace. They quieted and he paused for a moment to collect his thoughts. Given this space to think, he saw the merits of this new wrinkle in the plan, but wasn't entirely sure he wanted to go through with it. Even under the best of circumstances Harry wasn't very keen on his fame and this use for it seemed, well, downright humiliating. Harry couldn't find a way to express this objection without seeming whiny, so instead he settled on asking, "Why Blaise? I mean obviously I haven't got anything against you but..."

"Well obviously it has to be one of the three of us," said Tonks. "We're the ones you took to Alchemy, we're the ones who are clued in on the plan. Of the three of us, I think Blaise is the most believable for this type of thing. For one, I would seem just a touch too old for you..."

"And Hermione?" asked Harry.

"It would be a closer call with her," said Tonks, "especially since there's been speculation about the two of you on the gossip pages for years now. But I think if you and Hermione were to get together,

you wouldn't do it so publicly and – no offense Blaise – but Hermione doesn't really come off as the type to shag a bloke on a first date, even if that bloke is 'The Chosen One.' On the other hand, Blaise has never been romantically linked with you, she'll be new and exciting and speculation will run wild for a long time. I worry that if it was Hermione the stories would be of the "we were right all along" variety and they'll lose interest more quickly...we want this to play for as long as possible."

"What do you think of this, Hermione?" asked Harry, hoping that if she objected too he could seem reasonable in a refusal.

"It's a good idea so long as Blaise is comfortable with it," she said, dashing Harry's hopes. She turned to Blaise. "I know you've said you're already a target and you're alright with that, but being perceived as Harry Potter's girlfriend would make your personal danger skyrocket; I think the only people higher on Voldemort's hit list would be Harry himself and Dumbledore. Maybe the Minister, too. On top of that, this will be embarrassing, you'll probably be open to a fair bit of ridicule at Hogwarts, maybe even get a reputation for being 'easy.'"

Blaise gave a soft laugh. "Not to sound arrogant, but I doubt the level of male attention paid to me at Hogwarts could increase that substantially." She paused and grew more serious. "Honestly though, I knew what dangers I was opening myself to as soon as I heard the prophecy and decided to tell Harry about it. I'm 100% behind Harry and I'm 100% behind this mission to kill Voldemort, no matter what. So what do you say, Harry?"

Harry knew that after Blaise's answer, he could not refuse without looking petty and immature. He gave a small, nearly inaudible sigh and smiled at the blonde. "When can the three of you be ready?"

"Time is of the essence," said Blaise. "We're going to have to move quickly because I don't think Voldemort will hold off on recruiting you

much longer. Plus, you're going to want to get everyone settled at the Atoll before they go off to school. With that in mind...how's Friday night?"

"If you're gonna be ready by then, sounds fine to me," said Harry.

"Oh we'll be ready," said Blaise. "We steal it Friday night, and then you go to Voldemort on Saturday."

Harry nodded.

"Let's do it."

Author's Note: Once again, just a quick reminder that for the latest updates on RotA you can follow me on twitter at /SupremoStories. Just to give you an idea of the frequency with which I'm updating the twitter, I started the twitter account on September 27 when I was about 4 pages into this chapter and tweeted 37 times about my progress. If I can get a bunch of followers who are keeping me on my toes with SupremoStories messages, I expect that frequency will go up (as will the speed at which I update). So yeah, if you're interested about how the next update is coming, definitely check that out. So far I have two followers, who I'll give a brief shoutout to here: nostresreges, which is the account shared by the three excellent authors of VINCET and VULTUS SERPENTIS, which are perhaps the best "Let's rewrite the Harry Potter series from the start" stories out there; and AtrerPotter, who is working on his first fanfiction story right now.

On with the rest of the note.

First off, I just want to apologize for the relative lack of action in this chapter. I'm almost 100% this is the longest update yet, but its almost entirely expository. Sorry. Things will heat up in the next chapter though, and I think you'll really enjoy that.

Second, another apology. Although some of the delay of this chapter was legitimate (I was without a functional computer for the entire month of August), a lot of it was the result of me getting sucked into other people's stories and neglecting my own. The first of these was Muggle Summer, Wizard's Fall by canoncansodoff, which is long (350k+ words and not complete) but amazingly well written. The second was VINCET by nos tres reges, which is amazing and which we've already discussed. I highly recommend both.

Second (and I don't think I can emphasize this point enough), this is NOT a fic in which Harry takes the DA and forms some sort of ultra-elite combat squadron with them and they start murdering Death Eaters/Order of the Phoenix members in open battle left and right. I've used my brain in developing this story, so please please please use yours in trying to decipher it.

Third, for those of you wondering about how Blaise knows what she knows, all will be answered in good time. I can tell you that I've dropped a couple hints (including one gigantic whopping one) already. Hit me with your thoughts either through review, PM or twitter.

On to the Reviews section of the Author's notes! I think I'll follow the precedent from last time and comment on the top 5. So, not in any particular order...

To LoireLoa: You come first because you coined the term "Platinum Quartet" which I absolutely love and used twice in this chapter. Mad props. Your points about Harry being alone in his manliness and a pawn of Blaise's are well-taken, and I think you'll have seen the beginnings of a resolution to those problems in this chapter. One of the interesting things as this fic progresses is going to be how Harry begins to truly assert himself and go from a passive/reactionary figure into an active one. It will take time, but he's starting down the right road.

To Del'Cera Osirin: Thanks so much for the kind words! The pacing of this story is one element that I'm working really hard to get right, although it frequently leads to complications and delays that even I don't like. For instance, I started this chapter planning on having Harry meet Voldemort, but then realized there was a bunch that I had to cover first. All in good time, though! Also, obviously a key part of this story is my characterization of Voldemort, I'm glad you like it. I don't want anyone to get the idea that he's not an evil person because he is, but I'm trying to convey that it is possible to be both evil and a human at the same time and that no one who is evil thinks of themselves in those terms.

To greywizard-dumbledore: Like other negative reviewers before you, your general themes and some of your points are valid. However, I think you've misinterpreted some things. First, 4 Privet Drive is not under a Fidelius Charm. Never was in canon, never was in my story, never was in any fanfic I've ever read, actually. Also, Dumbledore has never cared about Harry's well-being at 4 Privet Drive (beyond the extent to which Voldemort and other nasties are kept out) before, so why should he now? This is all a part of his larger plan to keep Harry as weak as possible so that he can be dealt with after he kills Voldemort. Those are somewhat nit-picky points. The main point of that scene, which you apparently missed, was the role that emotion can play in clouding the judgment of even the wisest and most intelligent of men. If you made it as far as even chapter 6, you should be able to see why Dumbledore would be immensely troubled by any unsupervised contact Harry has with the goblins (and indeed, you'll notice that in canon, Harry is never in Gringotts by himself until the robbery in Deathly Hallows...he goes there either with the Weasleys or with Hagrid, or Mrs. Weasley 'picks up his things for him.'). Of course in Chapter 3, Dumbledore's specific fears are unfounded - Harry is only getting his Black inheritance in that instance - but when Harry bumps in to Dumbledore, the older wizard doesn't know that. The only things that have registered in his mind are 1) Harry is meeting with goblins and 2) No one was in the room. So he panics, and understandably so. There are a couple of deeper themes I'm

trying to explore in this fic: Good vs. Evil as a spectrum rather than a duality, sanity, super-ego and ego vs. id, reason vs. emotion. Dumbledore's outburst is one inroad into the latter of those.

To BadBonita: I've already written at length about my characterization of Voldemort, but I'm glad you like it :)

To madsloth: Thanks for the review. If you pay close attention to this story, you'll notice that a lot of it is me either subtly poking fun at or outright mocking fanfiction (and more general fiction, like the 'insanely complex plan' movie villains seem to like so much) ideas that irk me. The bit with Malfoy was one of the more obvious ones, the other really obvious one that comes immediately to mind is when Harry is reading in the Black Library and gets annoyed at authors who talk about how "magic is all about intent, i could kill you by levitating you off a cliff" etc etc. Try rereading RotA looking for this, I'll be interested to see how many you can find.

FAQs

-What elements from HBP/DH are you going to have in your story? How does Harry deal with Horcruxes? Horcruxes do not exist in RotA, and neither do the Deathly Hallows. There will be occasional borrowed elements from books 6 and 7, but typically they will be somewhat altered from the JKR original. For instance, I mentioned Sectumsempra earlier in RotA but had Kingsley refer to it as "the Dark cutting spell" rather than it being something that Snape invented while at Hogwarts. RotA will not follow anything resembling HBP's plotline...in fact, I've already used one really significant departure from the Voldemort backstory given in HBP, look in the beginning of Chapter 3 if you can't remember. As far as any characters that first appear in HBP or DH are concerned, I know I planned on using Slughorn when I started writing but I'm more iffy on him now. I don't think Rufus Scrimgeour will become Minister of Magic in RotA but he may show his face. New Death Eaters like the Carrows or Greyback may also show up. Frankly, I don't have a

unifying philosophy for this, apart from "if it makes sense, I'll do it, if not, I won't."

-WTF is Harry's rank? Is he an Earl, a Count, a Viscount or none of the above or what? Sigh. One of the biggest problems with the pace at which I've updated RotA is that I've completely bollixed (to borrow a Britishism) this bit up. Suffice it to say that Harry is some sort of nobleman, but that what specific rank he is doesn't really matter to the plot...I think I thought it would be an interesting angle when I started writing, but now I just don't want to deal with it. Harry is wealthy, his family is old, he can make poor people get out of his way if he's walking someplace crowded, that's all you need to know.

That's all for now, thanks so much for reading. Please keep reviewing because you should know I loooove those by now, follow me on twitter, do it all! Until next time...

Chapter 9: Joy to the World

"Look, look! There he is! It's Harry Potter!"

"Merlin, so it is! WE LOVE YOU, HARRY!"

"Who's that girl with him?"

"It's that blonde he took to Alchemy isn't it? What was her name? Must be nice..."

"Mr. Potter, over here! Won't you sign something for me? Mary, get a quill!"

"Where's he headed?"

"Does the Prophet know about this yet? Harry Potter before my very eyes!"

"HARRY I LOVE YOU!!!"

Harry set his face with a grin he hoped looked genuine and waved at no one in particular, provoking another raucous cheer from the Diagon Alley crowd watching him lead Blaise down the cobbled street toward Pewter, the ancient bistro favored by well-to-do wizards for centuries. In a gesture that the crowd might have mistaken as protective, Harry pulled the blonde closer to his body and growled into her ear, "You just had to have the twins spread it around that we were coming didn't you?"

"We had to make sure there would be reporters about," she whispered into Harry's ear, kissing him on the cheek and flashing a glowing smile as she did so.

"It's like a bloody parade," Harry whined, giving the crowd another wave. "Look at them, they're lined up three deep along the street, just

watching us! Who does that? Don't these people have jobs?"

"It's Friday evening, silly."

"Don't they have lives, then? Why aren't these people eating their own dinner instead of watching me walk to mine?"

"You're the biggest celebrity in our world, get used to it," said Blaise patiently. "Besides, the more people who see us, the merrier. You know the plan."

"Whatever, I'd almost rather lose my soul to Voldemort than deal with those morons anymore," exaggerated Harry as they approached the door to Pewter, which opened for them of its own accord. "At least we made it, I thought the walk over here would never end."

The maitre 'd was waiting for the couple as they crossed the threshold into the ancient, wood-paneled establishment. "Mr. Potter, Ms. Zabini thank you for choosing Pewter this evening. May I take you to your table?"

Harry gave the man a curt nod and followed behind Blaise as the maitre 'd led them to a cozy booth in the corner. As he sat down, Harry noticed that all outside noise had been blocked and, upon looking around the rest of the restaurant, realized that he could not see the faces or any other identifying features of the other patrons. Harry was comforted by the privacy – particularly after the insane crowd through which he had just come – but could not help but wonder about how many nefarious deeds had been plotted in this place.

He turned to Blaise and saw that the Slytherin was grinning at him over her menu. "The privacy charms are quite impressive, aren't they?" she asked.

"Very," he said, "Although I don't know how we're going to hear the

waiter when he comes by to take our orders."

Blaise giggled. "Oh Harry, sometimes I forget just how very new you are to this world. There are no waiters here, we'll give our orders to the menu and the food will appear before us on these plates. You remember, it's just like at the Yule Ball, unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless nothing besides Cho Chang registered in your mind that night," said Blaise, smirking.

Harry blushed. "You noticed, then?"

"Even if you were a nobody your staring would have been conspicuous," said Blaise lightly. "Throw in the fact that you were Harry Potter and pointedly ignoring your date, who happened to be one of the prettiest and most popular girls in the school...yeah, some people noticed. Shame it didn't work out between you two last year," she offered.

Harry waved Blaise off. "Thanks, but I'm long over her."

"Onto someone else, then?"

Harry simply smirked and ordered a rib steak, which appeared instantly upon his plate. Blaise ordered too, and the pair ate in relative silence, sometimes making light conversation but mostly staying within their own heads. It was a mark of the rapid development of their friendship that neither found the quiet uncomfortable. It was not until they had finished dinner and were nearly through dessert that Harry broached a serious topic.

"Blaise, what do we do if the plan fails?"

The Slytherin was visibly taken aback and did not speak for a moment. Finally, she said, "I don't believe it will fail. The prophecy says..."

"I know what the prophecy says," interrupted Harry, "but even you admit there are almost limitless ways it could be fulfilled. So what if our way doesn't work? What if Voldemort doesn't want to see me every day, or what if he breaks the Meminisse charm or what if..."

"I understand, Harry," said Blaise. "If the plan doesn't work, there are alternatives we can explore. It's possible that inflicting him with some sort of deadly disease or even killing him with Muggle weaponry would fulfill the prophecy. We have options. I don't think we'll be forced to resort to them, though. The plan is sound."

"Very well, if you say so," said Harry. He took a last bite of his tart and then set down his fork. "Ready to go face the hordes?" he asked.

Blaise sighed. "Ready as ever," she said and stood up. Harry left a Gringotts draft for the bill and followed Blaise out of the restaurant.

Almost immediately after crossing the threshold into Diagon Alley, Harry's senses were assaulted by a sudden burst of flashbulbs and yelling; as they had anticipated, a couple dozen members of the wizarding media were camped out in front of Pewter waiting for the couple.

"Nice to see you guys, how's it going?" said Harry with a touch of irony. This sparked another cacophony of yelling from the assembled reporters. Harry made an angry waving gesture at the gaggle and was surprised when it succeeded in quieting them.

"Look," he said, mustering all of his patience, "I'll be happy to answer some questions from you guys but it will only work if we can keep it orderly, right? So raise your hands and wait to be called on." The reporters instantly shoved their fists into the air and Harry, pleased

with how quickly he had asserted control, called on a witch in the first row.

"Mr. Potter, what brings you out to Pewter tonight? What's the occasion?"

"Nothing huge really," said Harry. "Blaise and I have recently become a couple, and we decided to celebrate our first night out in style is all. This is a marvelous place by the way, couldn't have had a better first date. Yes, you," he finished, indicating another reporter.

"You and Blaise have never been linked romantically before, so how did this relationship come about? Where did you meet, how did you get to know each other?"

Harry simply laughed. "What, and deny all of you the fun of digging around for yourselves? I'm keen to see what you can come up with on your own. You, go ahead."

"Harry, do you have any thoughts on your upcoming debuts in the Wizengamot and the ICW? Have you contacted Supreme Mugwump Dumbledore for help in preparing yourself at all?" asked the reporter, whose more businesslike robes suggested to Harry that his role was larger than that of a mere gossip reporter.

"I am looking forward to both equally," said Harry. "I hope to be able to do good work in those bodies. I haven't spoken with Dumbledore on any occasion since the run-in you lot reported at the beginning of the summer, however."

"Is that because of the rumored rift between the two of you?" asked the same reporter. "How will your damaged relationship with Dumbledore affect your studies when you return to Hogwarts next month?"

"Aha," said Harry, who was suddenly very nervous. "Well, this seems

to be as good a time for this announcement as any. My relationship with Albus Dumbledore will not affect my studies at all...and you'll want to write this next bit down. As of today, I am officially withdrawing from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

The gaggle of reporters, once so effectively tamed, erupted.

"Oh for Merlin's sake," Voldemort muttered to himself. Five minutes ago, the Dark Lord had been sitting comfortably in the throne of his room, listening to his favorite music program on the Wizarding Wireless Network and lazily sipping a most excellent pumpkin spice latte one of the elves had whipped up. Voldemort loved lattes. They provided the caffeine he needed to get through the day after late nights plotting to turn Potter, but had none of the harsh, bitter flavor of straight coffee or espresso and none of the Pepper Up potion's undignified side effects. Of course, none of the Death Eaters knew about this drink preference. Once during the first war, the elder Malfoy had asked what was in Voldemort's goblet. The Dark Lord had replied that he was drinking Muggle blood and Lucius never broached the topic again.

Voldemort was momentarily annoyed but ultimately thrilled when the announcer cut into the regular programming to broadcast Harry Potter's press conference live. In the past week, Voldemort's interest in the teen had escalated into a full-blown obsession. Draco was still useless and had little to say on the subject other than offer some feeble insults about Potter's parentage, but Pansy Parkinson – who was as plugged into the Hogwarts gossip network as anyone – turned out to be a veritable goldmine of information when Voldemort had called her in for questioning. Though Voldemort questioned the veracity of some of her more outlandish tales – it didn't seem particularly likely that Potter had actually driven off a hundred Dementors as a thirteen year old – Pansy's first hand account of Potter's use of Parseltongue had been a watershed moment for the Dark Lord. Before, he had merely wanted the boy as a curiosity, a symbol of his dominance, and if he made a passable Death Eater, so

much the better. But now, Voldemort needed Harry. He needed someone he could trust to handle all of his Death Eaters' buffoonery, to take the lead on the operational side of the organization and free Voldemort to work on the big picture unobstructed.

Then Harry had said it. "As of today, I am officially withdrawing from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft of Wizardry." Fifteen words that set Voldemort's heart soaring to the heavens. Of course, Voldemort's immediate reaction had been to spit a mouthful of pumpkin latte all over himself, and that was the reason the Dark Lord was muttering and upset. After a quick *Evanescio* Voldemort was listening to the press conference, this time with rapt attention.

"Please people, if you can't ask your questions one at a time, I won't answer any of them at all," came Harry's voice through the Wireless headset. The background hubbub died down and the Boy Who Lived called on a reporter.

"Why are you leaving school, Harry? Is it to do with Dumbledore?"

Harry's voice sounded exasperated. "I've commented on my relationship with Dumbledore more times than I care to count. That's not what this is about. I'm leaving Hogwarts because I don't feel like I can follow my true passion to the greatest extent there." There was a pause, and then Harry continued. "That leads me to my second announcement. I have decided that I must be true to myself and pursue my passion for flying as far as it will carry me. Effective since my visit to the Department of Magical Games and Sports...oh, just about three hours ago now, I am now eligible as an unrestricted free agent for the British and Irish Quidditch League."

Rather than being sent into another frenzy, the reporters seemed to have been struck dumb by Harry's second announcement. Finally, one of them recovered enough to ask a question.

"I don't understand," the reporter began. "It's been rumored for years

that you wanted to become an Auror upon graduation...why the sudden shift?"

"Well you answered the question yourself," said Harry. "Those were just rumors. In truth, I've never really wanted to be an Auror. Why would I want to spend my life working as a glorified police officer, eternally ordered around by the corrupt and incompetent Ministry? I've loved flying since the very first time I rode a broomstick; it is hardwired into the very core of my being. I'll be flying until the day I die, so why not make a career out of it?"

"But what if you're not good enough to compete in the league?" asked another reporter. "Shouldn't you have school to fall back on?"

"If it turns out I'm not good enough then obviously I'll have to reevaluate my options," said Harry. "I don't think that will be the case, however. And even if it is, well, to be frank, I have more than enough money to live a life of absurd excess without ever cashing a Gringotts draft. Any endeavor I take on will be purely for my own enjoyment, and being an Auror simply does not fit that bill."

"What about the war though, Harry? How can you fight You-Know-Who and the Death Eaters if you don't finish school? Wouldn't you be in the best position to defeat them as an Auror?"

"Are you kidding," asked Harry, and Voldemort thought he heard a smirk in the teen's voice. "There's more ways to help defeat Voldemort than mere violence. I can use my votes in the Wizengamot and the Galleons in my Gringotts account to help the Ministry and others bring that madman to his knees. But even if I were to fight Voldemort directly, am I likely to defeat him with knowledge from NEWT Defense Against the Dark Arts? I doubt it."

"But Harry..."

"No 'buts'! I'll remind you that as much as everyone wants me to be

the savior, Voldemort is most likely to be killed by an Auror or a mutinying Death Eater, not by me. The only way we can defeat Voldemort is for all of us to come together in that effort; it does no good for everyone to sit back and rest its hopes on one teenager. Now, if you don't mind, Blaise and I are headed back to the Leaky Cauldron. You can follow and ask questions if you like, but we should stop blocking Pewter's door."

Voldemort slowly tuned out as the press followed Harry up Diagon Alley and turned his thoughts inward. This was fantastic news. If Potter was leaving Hogwarts, then he was taking himself completely out of Dumbledore's sphere of influence. The boy would need guidance, he would need a more powerful wizard to mentor him and show him how to unlock his full potential. If he acted quickly, Voldemort knew that he could be that mentor. He did not believe for one second that there truly was no rift between Potter and Dumbledore; why else would they not have spoken in months? Why else would Potter have left Hogwarts?

The Dark Lord paused on this last question. Why had Potter left Hogwarts? The boy said he wanted to play Quidditch. Quidditch? Bullshit. Something else was at work here. Harry Potter was planning something, something that he needed to be away from Dumbledore to do. What could that be? Voldemort's first thought was that Harry planned to attack him all on his own, but he dismissed this idea as quickly as it came. To be sure, Potter had a fiercely independent streak and could be foolhardy and rash, but he was not insane or suicidal.

Could the boy perhaps be planning on joining the Death Eaters? This too seemed unlikely, Voldemort was certain that he would need to coerce Potter into his ranks. What was going on then?

Voldemort considered Potter's new girlfriend, Blaise Zabini. Her family was a somewhat old group of purebloods that had come to Britain from Italy a few centuries ago. The past several generations

of Zabini's had all been sorted into Slytherin, but none of them had ever shown a particular inclination toward following a Dark Lord. Voldemort himself had coveted Blaise's father during the first war, but the Unspeakable had been extremely skilled at evading the Dark Lord, and Voldemort had been forced to recruit Rookwood instead. He didn't know much about the girl herself other than she wasn't one of Malfoy's group. Voldemort wasn't sure if that was a bad thing or not.

In any event, dating the girl proved that Potter was truly growing apart from Dumbledore. He was certain that if Potter were Dumbledore's Golden Child, he would reflexively hate all Slytherins and would scarcely look at them, let alone date one. Furthermore, if absolutely nothing else, she was now a kidnapping target Voldemort could use to leverage both the elder Zabini and Potter if need be. This was all shaping up well for the Dark Lord.

He returned his thoughts to his plot to get Potter. The heart of his plan was essentially standard operating procedure: he would kidnap someone very close to Harry and use that person's life as leverage to bring the boy into the fold. There were two complications with this in the case of Harry. First, Dumbledore had seen to it that everyone close to the boy was under the stringent security, making it nearly impossible for Voldemort to accost anyone he might want to in their homes. The second complication was the problem of actually getting a message to Potter to let him know that someone had been kidnapped and Voldemort's conditions for that person's release. Potter was sealed up in that infernal hidey-hole the Order had used as its headquarters before Potter's falling-out with Dumbledore, and short of attempting another invasion of the boy's mind – a risk Voldemort was not keen to take – he had no way of contacting the boy there. On top of these was Voldemort's overriding concern for secrecy in this whole affair; he did not want anyone to even suspect that Potter was his before he was ready to make that public.

Voldemort's solution was complex, but he felt it was necessarily so.

He knew that the Minister of Magic's office was equipped with owls that could find anyone at any time and deliver a message to them, almost no matter what magical defenses the intended recipient had, including a Fidelius charm. Indeed, the only way for one of these owls to not reach its destination was if there was a very specific ward in place that killed all messenger owls that reached it. Voldemort was certain Harry would not have one of those for it was common knowledge the boy loved his snowy owl dearly, perhaps more than he loved any human. If Voldemort could get at one of those owls, he could be certain to reach Potter.

This in turn led to Voldemort's decision of who to kidnap. Though he could not reasonably attack the Weasleys at the Burrow, he might be able to take Arthur Weasley from his job inside the Ministry. This would be especially convenient if he did it at the same time as he went after the Minister's owls. Thus, the basic outline of the plan was settled: Voldemort would infiltrate the Ministry of Magic under some manner of disguise, kidnap Arthur Weasley, and then steal or otherwise obtain one of the Minister's owls.

Even within this plan there were further obstacles. Following the battle in the Department of Mysteries, the Ministry had instituted a new security system. Magical sensors had been placed in every room and hallway in the ministry and if they detected any offensive magic, the entire building would be locked down and a special squadron of Aurors would be dispatched to the area with the disturbance. If Voldemort wanted to carry out his plan, he'd have to do it without a single curse. The second, albeit less serious, obstacle was that the Minister's office had been warded against all manner of concealment charms for as long as such wards had existed. So he would have to somehow appear as himself while stealing the owl, without allowing anyone to see him and sound the alarm.

It was a tall order, but Voldemort had an idea...

As Blaise pulled him into the room, Harry allowed himself to smirk

and cast a roguish wink over his shoulder at the reporters still following and yelling questions before pulling the blonde into a deep, sensual kiss and kicking the door shut in the faces of his pursuers.

As soon as they heard the door snap into its frame, Harry and Blaise broke apart and cast every privacy charm they knew, Blaise covering the door, Harry the windows. When they finished, the pair grinned and shared a high-five and a hug in the center of the room.

"Well done," said Blaise when the hug ended, her eyes radiating mirth.

"You don't think we overdid it," he asked, also smiling broadly. "I was sort of concerned about..."

"No, I thought squeezing my bum as we went up the stairs was quite a nice touch," interjected Blaise.

"That's not what I was going to ask about," laughed Harry, "I meant the whole bit about following my 'true love of Quidditch.' You honestly think they'll go for that?"

Blaise shrugged. "The press are morons and gossip reporters are especially so. They'll buy it, they'll sell it, and before the end of the week everyone else will have bought it too." Blaise smiled and laid a hand softly on Harry's chest. "Everything went perfectly today, everything is going perfectly."

Harry returned the smile but did not linger. He pulled a Chinese finger trap out of the inner pocket of his robes, inserted his finger and offered the other end to Blaise. "Shall we?" he asked.

Blaise removed her hand from Harry's chest, touched the finger trap and said, "Heathrow." A familiar jerk on the navel, and they were gone.

"I mean seriously, how do Muggles travel like that?" asked Blaise for what Harry thought had to have been at least the fortieth time. "Stale air, uncomfortable seats, smelly Muggles...and can you believe how rude everyone was? The Muggle in front of me kept raising and lowering his seatback every few minutes, he nearly upset my juice!"

"Stuff it," ordered Harry. "Are you and Tonks ready yet?"

The Platinum Quartet were crouched on the roof of the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, crouching and hugging closely to the dome to minimize the visual distortion effects of their Disillusionment charms. Blaise and Tonks were busy rigging a harness system that would allow the team to enter the museum and deliver the pulse without triggering any of the security systems they were attempting to knock out. This had the added benefit of being completely non-magical; indeed, Hermione had insisted that the whole mission be carried out with as little magic as possible so that magical authorities, who might be made curious by the total failure of the alarm system, would have no reason to investigate further.

"Yeah, we're ready," said Tonks. "All four lines attached and ready to go."

"Then get on with it," said Harry. "Our return flight is in three hours and we'll want plenty of time to get through security."

Blaise passed out the steel rope lines among the team, Harry attached the end of his to carabiner on the harness he had donned hours ago and waited for the rest to follow suit. Soon, the four had lowered themselves into the lobby of the museum and paused, hovering ten feet above the floor. Harry gave a nod to Blaise and the pureblood closed her eyes and began chanting.

It was a beautiful thing to watch. Shortly after Blaise began chanting, the room, illuminated softly by the moon, began to blur. Before long, the blur seemed to condense into soft white streaks until they

pervaded the air, obscuring all else. Instinctively, Blaise lifted her arms in front of her and cupped her hands a foot apart, as if she were holding an invisible beach ball. The soft streaks began to drift into the space between Blaise's hands and swirl closer together until they formed a small uneven sphere. More and more streaks joined the sphere, causing it to grow and spin faster than ever before and consequently accelerating the rate at which other streaks were attracted to the sphere. Before long, all the streaks were gone from the air and the sphere, writhing tempestuously, filled the whole space between Blaises' hands. Harry could not help but gaze with unabashed awe at the sphere; his rational brain could not explain it, but he felt the most powerful compulsion he had ever felt toward the sphere. It was perfect and he longed to touch it more than anything in the world. Had he not been so wrapped up in his own obsession with the sphere, he would have noticed that Tonks and Hermione's faces bore the same look of naked desire.

Blaise stopped chanting and opened her eyes, smiling softly at the ball when she saw it. Her gaze lingered for only a moment, however, before she closed her eyes once more and whispered, "Liberate."

Instantly, the whole room was filled with white light, brighter than Harry had ever thought possible, blinding Harry along with the rest of the group. As suddenly as it had come, the light disappeared and the team watched as what could only be described as a shockwave of magic raced out of sight down every hallway of the museum. After a couple seconds, Blaise sighed and turned her head to the rest of the group. "It's done," she stated simply, almost as though she was sad to have left the company of the sphere of magic.

Silently, the group lowered themselves the rest of the way to the floor and were pleased when no alarms went off. They quickly detached themselves from their lines and set off: Tonks and Blaise to the King Tut exhibit to liberate it of its most valuable treasures and Hermione to the same location to find the team's true prize.

Meanwhile, Harry strode purposefully to the security room adjacent to the lobby. Inside, he found two Egyptian men squabbling in Arabic, desperately hitting every button on the control panel before them in the vain hope that something would make their monitors come back on. The men stopped and looked up when they saw the door open and close, but being unused to detecting Disillusioned wizards – and indeed, being wholly ignorant to the idea that such a thing might exist – did not see Harry and returned to their hopeless pounding on the control panel.

The corner of Harry's lips twitched slightly into the beginning of a smirk, but he ruthlessly suppressed it. You must not enjoy this, he told himself furiously. You are only doing this because it is necessary!

Properly cowed, Harry somberly raised a 9mm pistol he purchased from an arms dealer earlier that evening and leveled it at the nearest guard.

BANG

The guard fell to the ground, instantly dead, bleeding horrifically from the bullet wound in his head. The other guard, his face and uniform spattered with the blood of the first guard, staggered backwards into the far wall in shock and began looking around wildly for the assailant, eyes streaming.

"I'm sorry," Harry said aloud before leveling his gun once more. He meant it. "Muggle thieves would kill you. So too must I."

BANG

Harry turned away from the gruesome scene he had created and reentered the lobby. He leaned against the wall and shook violently, fighting the urge to vomit. Killing without dark magic to supply false euphoria was horrible. Those men had been innocent, guilty only of being assigned to work at the wrong time on the wrong night. Harry

knew he had to do it to maintain the farce that this was a Muggle operation, but he could not help but hate himself. Finally, one thought broke through the self-loathing: By the grace of Merlin, I hope I can still feel this way in seven months.

Several minutes later, when Harry had finally composed himself, he entered the King Tut exhibit where the three girls were hard at work smashing the glass displays and packing the ancient treasures into charmed duffel bags. Hermione was the first to notice Harry and immediately dropped her duffel, ran to his side and wrapped the Boy Who Lived in a hug. Harry returned it, clinging to his best friend with all he had. Blaise and Tonks joined the pair and laid comforting hands on Harry's shoulders; Blaise rubbing his right and Tonks his left.

After a moment, Harry broke the embrace and asked, his voice still somewhat dead, "Have we got it?"

"Yes, I've got the pendant here, Harry," said Hermione softly. She reached into her pants pocket and retrieved a small golden pendant in the shape of a winged cobra. Harry took it from her and examined it closely. It was exactly as depicted in the picture Blaise had shown him on his birthday, which now felt like eons ago. The cobra was reared up in the characteristic threat position, hood flared, mouth open and fangs prominently displayed; it appeared to be hissing. The wings were spread powerfully halfway down the beast's back and were covered in scales.

Seeing the pendant in person had Harry giddy with excitement, his distress over his earlier murders completely forgotten. "Are we sure the enchantment still works?"

"Yes, Harry," said Blaise. "The Golden Amphiptere of Thebes is as potent as ever."

Harry smiled broadly, unable to contain himself. "Then let's pack the

rest of this and get out of here. We've got a plane to catch."

It was 3 a.m. on Sunday morning and Lord Voldemort was readying himself for bed. There was a common misperception – one that Voldemort had worked long and hard to cultivate, for it made him seem less human and thus more scary – among Death Eaters and the general public alike that the Dark Lord did not sleep. In reality, Voldemort simply had a very odd sleeping schedule that typically saw him to bed around four or five in the morning and not awake again until past noon. This had first developed when he was an up-and-coming Dark wizard learning the tricks of the trade; it only took so many midnight raids and past-midnight secret meetings before staying up late became a habit. Nowadays Voldemort genuinely preferred his schedule...there was something calming about the silence and solitude of late nights that he simply couldn't replicate anywhere else.

There were two reasons Voldemort was going to bed so early on this night. The first was that it had simply been a long day. The younger Malfoy had somehow snapped back to his former self and was once again strutting and preening around the manor, acting for all the world like one of the many peacocks that patrolled the grounds. Beyond that, he had learned in the Daily Prophet that all Gringotts accounts belonging to suspected Death Eaters would be partially frozen pending a Wizengamot vote on whether or not to seize them. Though Voldemort had long-since withdrawn all his assets and moved them into investments, Muggle banks and privately-controlled vaults, he knew few of his followers would have had this level of foresight, meaning that a demand for payment for their services as Death Eaters could not be far off.

The second reason was that Voldemort was trying to reset his sleep cycle – if only a little bit – so that he would be well-rested for Monday's assault on Arthur Weasley and the Minister's special owls. In order to get aroHe walked und the Ministry's wards against offensive magic and concealment charms, he had decided that he

would simply possess Arthur and make him get the Minister's owls and then go home at lunch due to "illness." The plan was simple and effective, and Voldemort went to sleep confident that Potter would be his by Monday night.

As soon as he lost consciousness and began to dream, Voldemort found himself standing on an infinitely long and infinitely wide white plane. How odd, thought Voldemort, who was more accustomed to dreams of brutally torturing and killing the more idiotic among his followers. He walked around for a few steps, but seeing that this accomplished literally nothing, stopped and waited for something to happen.

"Hello," said a familiar voice. The Dark Lord whirled around and saw Harry Potter standing there casually, observing the Dark Lord with a grin.

"Harry Potter," said Voldemort. "How interesting. What are you doing in my dreams?"

"You're not dreaming, technically," said Harry. "Although you did need to be asleep for me to get you here...and Merlin did that take a long time. Do you always stay up so late?"

Deciding it wouldn't be worth it to lie, Voldemort ignored Harry's question. "You haven't answered me," he said, drawing up as much authority as he could. "Why are you here?"

"I've come to grips with the prophecy lately, and I've come to fulfill it," said Harry simply. "Surely you know the one I'm talking about."

Voldemort was nonplussed. "What, you're going to try to kill me here? You'd be lucky to so much as wake me up! Stupid boy!" Voldemort turned his back on Harry, as if daring the teen to take a shot at him. Perhaps I was wrong to covet him so much, Voldemort began to think, but Harry's next words stopped him dead.

"What makes you think 'fulfilling the prophecy' means me trying to kill you?"

Voldemort turned slowly to face the boy, his mind racing. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean that the prophecy won't be fulfilled by either of us killing each other. In fact, it would be fulfilled by the exact opposite," said Harry, grinning at the Dark Lord. "Let me show you."

Harry screwed up his eyes in brief concentration and a large rectangular screen appeared before Voldemort's eyes. Both the Dark Lord and Harry watched as one of Harry's memories materialized and began to play on the screen. They watched together as Stillstone opened the Prophecy Box and as Grabtooth began chanting over the orb in Gobbledegook. Voldemort's breath caught in his throat as he recognized the ghostly figure of Sibyl Trelawney appear out of the orb,

And then she said it. Fifty-nine words that set Voldemort's world on fire.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches

Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies

But the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, for he has powers the Dark Lord values above all

And together they shall be invincible, for neither can die while the other survives."

Voldemort did not question his good fortune. He did not wonder if the memory might have been altered, or if Harry might have his own

motives for coming forward. As pure, unmitigated joy coursed through Voldemort's body, only two thoughts broke through into conscious articulation.

I am finally immortal.

The world is mine.

Author's Note: As you may or may not have been able to tell, this was a somewhat important chapter. Allow me to clear up a couple issues that I'm sure are to arise

-Yes, Harry has deceived Voldemort with a fake prophecy of his own. How he accomplished this and how he will maintain the charade for seven months will be revealed shortly, most likely in the next chapter. It would be wise to notice the characterization of Harry in the final scene and the point-of-view from which it was told.

-Yes, you will soon learn about the Golden Amphiptere of Thebes and why Harry and the rest went to such great lengths to steal it. Obviously, the name of the artifact lends itself to title of this fan fiction.

OK, maybe that didn't clear up much at all. Deal with it. Let's move on to the reviews! As always, I have selected the five best reviewers since the last update and am responding to them here. Not in any particular order...

To meteoricshipyards: Typically, I prefer to respond to reviews that are more in-depth than yours, but you brought up something interesting. The phenomenon Harry experienced in Chapter One is referenced twice in this chapter...the first should be obvious, and figuring out the second will give you a large hint as to what Harry is doing in RotA.

To Stick97: Thank you. I could not agree with you more about the horrendous disservice JKR did to Hermione in the final two books. Thankfully, she has been gloriously reimagined in the movies...even if they have to keep her with Ron. Sigh. Lifetilt. Your observations about where I am taking Hermione in this fic are astute...though I don't think I've shown it much yet in this story, Hermione is my favorite character in the Harry Potter universe and I plan on having a great deal of fun with her before I'm done.

To 1Azrael1: I've sort of alluded to this a couple times throughout the story, particularly in this chapter, but I have a theory for why wizards don't simply jack Muggle things all the time. Its my belief that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement must conduct its own investigation of all major thefts in the Muggle world and somehow scan to see if any magic was used to assist or conduct the robbery...and they would then, theoretically at least, have some way of tracing the villains responsible. Furthermore, I think most wizards would probably consider themselves "above" robbing Muggles for their livelihood. That does not mean, however, that unscrupulous magical individuals could not make a fortune through dishonest means in the Muggle world. I believe I have alluded to this before (or simply said it out loud), but in the RotA universe, a great deal of the Black fortune that Harry inherited at the beginning came from liberal use of the Imperius curse against Muggles with whom the Blacks entered business dealings.

To taxzombie: All my readers should know by now that there is no easier way to find your way into this section than to praise my characterization of Voldemort. taxzombie is the latest beneficiary of this :)

To YamiNoTomoyo: Thanks so much for the review! Strangely, you were (I believe, terribly sorry if I missed someone) the only person to comment on the alibi! I thought for sure that would be more popular! Oh well. You'll notice that the description of the Golden Amphiptere of Thebes does not match up precisely with the traditional description of

an amphiptere. As you'll discover, it was the intent of the creator of the pendant that it not be exactly like the real thing. Unfortunately for your hopes that Harry will gain an amphiptere as a familiar, though this was something I planned on in the very early days of planning for this fic, it's not gonna happen. You may be pleased by some of Harry's other animal acquaintances, however :D. As usual, I've left hints.

FAQs

-Why does your German suck so bad? Did you use some shitty online translator? OK OK OK, you got me. I took German in 8th, 9th and 11th grades, but by the time I wrote the german passage earlier in the story I was definitely rusty...and that doesn't begin to scratch how rusty I am now. Terribly sorry to those of you who have commented on this. Out of curiosity, would anyone be willing to serve as a German translator for me? I don't really think I'll need to use it again, but it would be nice to know if someone was willing to do it.

-Why did you give Harry eleventy bajillion Galleons? Why must authors always use this crutch? I can't speak for other authors, but I am not using Harry's inheritance as a crutch...it has genuine importance to both the plot of RotA and the deeper themes I'm attempting to explore in RotA. You'll notice that there is no scene in RotA where I describe in rhapsodic detail a long shopping trip Harry takes through Diagon Alley or to Harrod's or something similar.

-Why don't you post more often? In truth, I'm a pretty busy guy and I just can't give fan fiction the level of attention I once was able to. I'm a junior at a fine college, I'm working both a paid retail job and an unpaid internship, I have a girlfriend I've been dating for 3 years. Much of the free time I do have is consumed by online poker, which, considering that I made more through it than through my "real jobs" last year, could very easily be considered a third job. This is not to say that I don't love all of you or that I don't care about the story, because I do very much. It's just that I have many more things

competing for my time now than I did when I began this project in high school. However, as I said at the top, my only New Year's Resolution this year was to update this fic at least every two months this year. I hope to keep that resolution.

As always, please review! And once more, follow me at /supremostories for the latest RotA news and updates.

CHP11